

Exploring the Impacts of Internet-mediated Communication on Iranian Women's Rights Activism

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the 1990s, when Internet technology was embraced by the Zapatista liberation movement in Mexico and the anti-globalization activists in Seattle, a wide range of cross-disciplinary research has been conducted on the consequences of the Internet for activism in particular and for socio-political change as a whole. The bulk of the resultant literature sides with utopian or dystopian views of the impacts of the Internet, paying little attention to the socio-political context in which activists operate and use the Internet. This thesis engages with the other camp of studies that recognizes the role of context in shaping the implications and effects of the Internet (e.g. Bennet, 2003; DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Harlow & Harp, 2012; Harp, Bachmann, & Guo, 2012), focusing its investigation on the impacts of the Internet on activists in the context of Iran.

Iran entered a period of political and social transformation with the victory of reform-minded Mohammad Khatami in the 1997 presidential election. During Khatami's reformist administration, civil society and democratic entities, such as NGOs and the press, flourished. This in turn helped activists -- mainly women's, laborers', and students' rights activists -- gain an unprecedented collective aspiration for building a more democratic society (Behraves, 2014). The Internet in Iran expanded during this reform era amidst clashes between reformists and conservatives over freedom of the press. The unprecedented liveliness of the civil society and the escalation of conservatives' pressure on the reformist and independent press in the early 2000s was the beginning of the politicization of the Internet in Iran (Dehghan, 2009; Rahimi & Gheytauchi, 2008; Shirazi, 2010). The Internet, which in its early days of adoption served as an academic, commercial, and recreational means¹, began to offer "an alternative public discourse

¹ Iran became the second Middle Eastern country to officially join the World Wide Web, since two of its universities established the first connection to the global network in early 1993 (Rafizadeh & Alimardani, 2013). The Internet was promoted by the government as a new means of scientific and technological advancement that could assist the country during the troubled economic period following the Iran-Iraq war. Originating from universities, following the emergence of private Internet Service Providers (ISPs), the Internet was introduced to the commercial and educational sectors, and then on to the Iranian public in

to the state-controlled media” (Rahimi, 2008, p. 37). Editorial teams of newspapers affiliated with the reformists launched their own online publications (Michaelsen, 2011). The younger and more technological savvy reformists, especially, used online personalized spaces like weblogs as a forum to debate topics of a complex and polemical nature normally banned in print media (Rahimi & Gheyntanchi, 2008). The target audiences were not only political elites but also the younger audiences whose support would be crucial in pursuing reform programs. This younger population extensively took to the blogosphere, too, to express their independent viewpoints (Rahimi & Gheyntanchi, 2008). This made the Iranian blogosphere one of the biggest and most active in the world (Deibert et.al., 2010, p. 547).

The following decades have seen a growing trend toward the exploitation of the Internet as a force for socio-political change in the country. However, academics’ efforts to assess the democratic promises and threats of the Internet have left behind its widespread and quick deployment in Iranian society. Particularly, to date, the involvement of Iranian activists with the Internet has remained substantial but under-researched. In addition to reformists, activists from a variety of groups were among the early participants in virtual space. Individual activists living in Iran or in the diaspora exploited the blogosphere in order to strengthen their public voices, while various websites associated with NGOs and activist organizations also emerged. Since 2007, which saw the beginning of the decline of blogging in Iran (Akhavan, 2013, p. 9), social networking sites have begun to offer new space for Iranian activism. Particularly, before, during, and after the disputed 2009 presidential election, social networking sites, chiefly Facebook, became a popular means of communication for reformists and social activists who promoted issues of social groups such as women, students, and laborers (Golkar, 2015).

1994. (Rahimi, 2003). Recognizing its academic and economic benefits, and aiming to develop e-government programs, the post-war governments conducted national plans to develop the infrastructure; thus carrying out Internet training programs at schools and governmental organizations (Sohrabi-Haghighat, 2011). Spurred forward by the country’s growing youthful demographic and considerable growth of educational levels, these efforts resulted in the rapid growth of Internet users in Iran (Freedom House, 2012). While there were 250,000 Internet users by the end of 2000, the number of Internet users in 2005 rose to several million (Internet World Stats, 2017). Seventy percent of the population had been provided Internet access by the beginning of 2017, which left Iran with the highest number of Internet users in the Middle East (Internet World Stats, 2017).

The objective of this thesis is to explore the impacts of Internet-mediated communication on Iranian women's rights activism. The case of women's rights activism provides a window to understanding the role of the Internet within one of the most prominent and dynamic activist circles in the country and the region. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, women's rights are a "central battleground in the fight for legitimacy and control (Bradley, 2007, p. 4)." Particularly since the 1979 Revolution, Iranian women's rights activism has succeeded in advancing women's equality within the realms of family, education, and employment. Such activism existed before the Internet age and became an early adapter of the Internet in the early 2000s. Its existence in both eras allows for a better realization and understanding of the changes it has experienced since the deployment of the Internet. Chapter Two of this thesis supplies a comprehensive explanation of the characteristics of women's rights activism, its dynamic within Iran's socio-political transformations, and the history of its engagement with the Internet communication.

The investigation into the impacts of the Internet on Iranian women's rights activism was conducted through three core research questions (RQs), which were derived from the review of the activism's characteristics and the extant theoretical and empirical studies about online communication for activism and social movements. To wit: "How has Internet utilization affected women's rights activists' public communication?", "How has Internet utilization affected women's rights activists' internal relations?", and "How has women's rights activists' online media affected the resonance of women's rights issues in the Iranian press?" The methodological approach taken to answer the first two research questions is a mixed methodology based on qualitative interviews with women's rights activists and the observation of online activities of women's rights groups and campaigns. The data for the third research question was collected through qualitative interviews with women's rights activists and the country's print media journalists.

The first hand empirical results of this study are expected to make a contribution to the academic knowledge of the Internet and activism within civil societies suffering from direct state intervention and control. Iranian activists, including women's rights activists, operate under constant closings and openings imposed on civil society. Particularly since the 1997 reform era, such a situation is being shaped by reformist-conservative conflicts over freedom of speech, the media, and social activities. While part of the literature on contemporary Iran considers an even

antagonistic relationship between state and social and political actors, the true picture of Iranian civil society exhibits the influence of the political elite fragmentation on the level of autonomy and control given to the Iranian civil society. This situation is illustrated through a popular metaphor that is used to describe the political situation in Iran: a ‘crossroads’². Iran is described as a crossroads “between modernity and tradition, reform and conservatism, and democratization and political repression (Bradley, 2007, p. 6).” The study of Internet-mediated communication within the Iranian context with its own particularities can provide new insight into the understanding of activism and this technology. The remainder of this chapter defines what is the activist/activism referred to in this research and highlights the nature of women’s rights activism as a new social movement. It then goes on to explain the current status of the research and structure of this thesis.

1.1 Defining an Activist/Activism in This Research

It is important to define a key term that will be frequently used in this thesis: activist. There is no consensual definition amongst social movement and collective action scholars, who have made the bulk of contributions, on which level of involvement with a socio-political cause constitutes activism. Some scholars include low risk/cost activities, such as regular participation in the electoral process, or donating money to a movement, or signing a petition in the boundaries of activism (e.g. Corning & Myers, 2002; McAdam, 1986). Corning and Myers (2002, p. 704), for example, considered an activist who has “developed, relatively stable, yet changeable orientation to engage in various collective, social-political, problem-solving behavior spanning a range from low risk, passive, and institutional acts to high-risk, and unconventional behaviors.” In defining activism, other studies, however, have excluded people who make token contributions, and only considered those individuals who invest their time and energy to activities of a movement or activist organization that may come with personal costs and difficulties (e.g. Searle-Chatterjee, 1999; Seguin, Pelletier, & Hunsley, 1998). For instance, Seguin et.al (1998) distinguished non-activist individuals who show their concerns about the quality of their environment through easy or light behaviors from environmental activists who are more motivated and determinant to get involved in difficult behaviors in order to protect their environment.

2 See, for example, the book ‘Iran at the Crossroads’ by Esposito and Ramazani (2001).

This research perspective toward activism is in alignment with the latter strand of studies. Activists in this research are those who have greater involvement and determination than people who are just adherents to a cause. For the purpose of this research, inspired by the McAdam (1986) classification of high-risk activism, and Searle-Chatterjee's (1999) definition in studying feminist and environmentalist activists, four criteria have been set out for an activist. The first is having a history of activism. As Searle-Chatterjee (1999) suggested, an activist consciously describes herself as such. The second is having a commitment to the objectives of activism. Therefore, as Searle-Chatterjee (1999) asserted, an activist expends a significant amount of time and energy on their cause. The third is having a relative acceptance of the risks involved in participation. Risk refers to "activists' subjective anticipation or expectation of dangers - legal, social, physical, financial, etc. - of participation" (Wiltfang & McAdam, 1991, p. 989). Last but not least, a condition for being labeled an activist has to do with having contacts in an activism network. This criterion reflects a harmony amongst most scholars on the fact that interpersonal ties with people who define themselves as activists are critical to propelling activism (e.g. Acheson & Williamson, 2001; Corning & Myers, 2002; McAdam, 1986).

Therefore, throughout this thesis, the term 'women's rights activist' refers to anyone describing her/himself as an activist, and who is actively committed to engaging in presumably risky activities in order to promote the rights of Iranian women. In addition, a women's rights activist in this study is engaged with the women's rights activism network. Iranian women's rights activists are normally connected to a network of like-minded colleagues by participating in two forms of activist groups: well-defined groups (including established groups and NGOs) and loosely defined groups (such as informal associations and ad hoc groups). Both types normally have a decentralized structure and do not obligate activists to be registered or recruited. Fluid membership in one or more of these groups allows activists to pursue their individual women's rights-related activities, while at the same time enforcing their collectivity. There are individual activists who operate entirely independent of any activist groups but are still connected to the activism network through co-operating with the women's rights movement's campaigns and coalitions.

1.2 Have Iranian Women's Rights Activists Formed a Social Movement?

The position of this research in the debate about the existence of a women's rights movement in Iran should be clarified at the outset³. A recent and well-cited definition of social movements offered by Diani (1992) is as follows: "A network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity" (p. 13). According to this definition and common understanding of social movements, the formation of a cooperation network between a collection of activists and activist groups is the defining characteristic of a social movement. The Iranian women's rights activism demonstrates the existence of such informal networks linking the bulk of activist groups (both well-defined and loosely defined groups) and individual activists. Examples of cooperation among women's rights groups which have resulted in the formation of special purpose coalitions and campaigns will be presented in Chapter 2 and Chapter 6. In line with the majority of studies on women's rights discourse in Iran (e.g. Lorestani, 2003; Mahdi, 2004; Naghavi, 2008; Rostami, 2004), this research takes the position that there is indeed a women's rights movement in Iran, one exhibiting the core characteristics of a 'new social movement' as specified by prominent new social movements' (NSMs) theorists.

Underscored by all prominent social movement theorists, NSM is, above all, new to old movements, mainly working-class movements, by persuading social and cultural issues of everyday life rather than economic goals. Habermas argues that NSMs are rooted in a different dynamic from the old Marxist model of capital and labor. He perceived NSM movements as part of the resistance of lifeworld to the colonization of economic and administrative systems, and therefore located "at the seam between the system and lifeworld" (1981, p. 36). He asserted these

³ Due to the particular characteristics of Iranian women's rights activism and the social-political aspects that affect its dynamic, the nature of this activism has been always the subject of debate. While a great part of scholarly studies and women's rights activists themselves have commented that women's rights activists in Iran have forged a women's rights movement that has the features of a new social movement, some scholars question the existence of an established women's movement in Iran mainly through comparison with Western feminist women's movements. For instance, Jalayipour (2002) argued that women's rights activism in Iran has not turned into a true movement because the activists avoid the label 'feminist' for fear of being labeled instead as 'anti-family'. (It should be noted that such fear was rarely recognized amongst activists interviewed for this study).

movements are shaped by feminists, nonconformist students, environmentalists, and people living alternative lifestyles who, rather than ask, “What we should get?” ask instead, “Who are we? How do we live? And who is accountable?” The Iranian women’s rights movement, like its Western counterparts, aims to improve women’s status and life quality by eliminating gender inequalities. It targets two sources of discrimination reinforcing one other: patriarchal beliefs and discriminatory legislation and policies. Although some women’s rights activists have periodically been involved with the economic demands of working-class women, the core activities of the activism are not around issues of economic distribution, but rather advancing women’s position in their own families and society. It is due to this social base of NSMs including, Iranian women’s rights movement, that member activists can be specifically referred to as social activists. Social activists are different from political activists in the conventional sense, for political activists aim to influence or alter state power (Brandt, 1986; Melucci, 1989). This while activists of NSMs advance the social and cultural status of people, even if some or all may also take political stances (Buechler, 1995) or have a political effect, such as the politicization of decision-making (Brandt, 1986).

For NSM theorists, the social base of NSMs, rather than its material base, explains why NSMs such as the environmental, anti-nuclear, peace, and women’s movements were mainly operated by the middle class. Theorists explain that although the issues addressed by NSMs affect everyone in a society, it is the characteristics of a professional or new middle class - high educational status, relative economic security, and personal service employment - that make them the core participants in these movements (e.g. Calhoun, 1993; Croteau, 1995; Eder, 1993; Offe, 1985). While accepting that it is the members of the new middle class who are the main participants in these movements, prominent theorists have emphasized that since NSMs promote goals cutting across class lines, unlike that of conventional movements, class-membership should not manifest a new social movement identity (e.g. Buechler, 1995; Melucci, 1984; Offe, 1985). Since the early 20th century, the women’s rights discourse in Iran has been mainly articulated by women in the middle class. Particularly, since the Islamic or Iranian Revolution of 1979, the core agents of this movement have belonged to the new middle class of Iranian society, including intellectual women, academics, students, journalists, lawyers, and artists. These activists come from all over the country and from different sectors of society: secular, religious, modern, and traditional (Mahdi, 2004). Therefore, they give voice to the demands of women from different

social-class and social sectors. Explaining in Offe (1985) language, the movement is conducted “by” a class but “is not on behalf of a class.” The middle-class activists of this movement address the issues of rural women, such as under-age marriage and girls’ education at the same time they raise middle class demands, such as achieving equal job opportunities, as well as class-unspecific demands, like child custody and divorce rights.

Another defining characteristic of contemporary movements is their new organizational form. Old movements normally consisted of hierarchical organizations with limited internal democracy (Croteau, 1995). In NSMs, by contrast, successful mobilization is not based on centralized organizational forms (Gusfield, 1994; Melucci, 1989; Offe, 1985). Although variations do exist, these movements tend to embrace diversity, decentralization, and informality rather than centralization, formality, and strong leadership (Gundelach, 1984). Such organizational correlations, in addition to their opposition to control and dependence, maintain their identity and autonomy (Offe, 1985). Therefore, as Melucci insisted, NSMs are “movement networks” since they are “the network(s) of informal relationships connecting core individuals and groups to a broader area of participation” (1984, p.828). As already mentioned, the Iranian women’s rights movement is composed of informal, decentralized, and leaderless networks connecting women’s rights groups and individual activists. As Mahdi (2004) explained, this movement “lacks the necessary ingredients of the classical social movements, such as clearly defined goals and direction, strong leadership, and necessary organizations” (p. 444).

Throughout this thesis, the term women’s rights movement is not used frequently because it may imply that concentration is only in networks comprised of activist groups and individuals. The women’s rights activist groups operate on their own and concentrate on specific women’s-related fields on a regular basis while they also act jointly when a common cause is at hand. For this reason, the term ‘women’s rights activism’ is used to clarify that the focus of this study is not only on the social movement network and joint collective actions among various women’s rights groups, but also on the solitary activities of the activist groups and individuals.

1.3 Current State of Research

Research on the democratic potential of the Internet in Iran has mainly concentrated on public participation, providing little empirically grounded knowledge of the deployment of the Internet by activists. To date, the largest contribution in the understanding of the Internet's socio-political role in Iran was made by several studies emerging after the 2009 Iranian Green Movement.

These studies were mainly focused on citizens' online participation and the role of the Internet in the mobilization of spontaneous demonstrations (e.g. Karagiannopoulos, 2012; Sohrabi-Haghighat & Mansouri, 2010; Tusa, 2013). Although various activist groups, including women and student activities, were involved in this movement, there is little published data on their online activities during the 2009 protests. Particularly in terms of Iranian women's right activism, while there is a considerable amount of literature on the activism history and offline actions, there is not much on their activities in the online realm. While there is a number of scholarly non-empirical research supplying the general picture of Iranian activists on the Internet (Golkar, 2015; Lerner, 2010; Michaelsen, 2011; Rahimi & Gheytauchi, 2008), this section introduces very few empirically grounded works carried out on this subject. These studies focused on women's rights activists and Iranian political activists in the diaspora.

In their book, 'Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran', Sreberny and Khiabany (2010) conducted a categorization of the types of Iranian blogs, hosted by two major Iranian blog hosting sites, and their content. They uncovered that alteration of various discriminatory laws against women was among key issues that set the blogosphere bubbling in Iran. Thereafter, as detailed in the fourth chapter of the book, the authors carried out an investigation of the emergence of women's websites and blogs in Iran. They introduced the main websites and blogs of women's rights activist groups and individuals from 2002 to 2007. They also conducted content analyses of two well-known women's blogs. To date, this book chapter has provided the most comprehensive picture of women's rights activist websites and blogs and their main areas of struggle. The authors illustrated that "[i]n cyberspace, a wide range of organizations and individuals have been actively debating the most mundane of topics that are related to gendered relations and state policies that affect Iranian women. (p. 129)" The result of their study was later reinforced by Shirazi, who has published several articles about the Internet for civil society empowerment in Iran. Shirazi (2012) analyzed the main women's issues openly discussed on the most popular women's blogs and websites. Although the amount of analyzed content and the time period were not specified, the analysis did suggest that discriminatory laws were indeed the main concern of women bloggers, along with various aspects of women's daily lives in Iran, from the socio-cultural, like women and sport, to political and economic issues.

Analysis of the content of women's blogs was also carried out by Akhavan (2011), someone also known for her efforts to shed light on the socio-political use of the Internet in Iran⁴. Her study provided a different account of women's blogging compared to the above research. She explained that, as a result of considering Iranian women as always trapped, victimized, and disenfranchised, most of the narratives had taken the appearance of women blogs as resistance, dominated by radical and secular women opposed to religious-based governments. She revealed two often-overlooked dimensions of the blogosphere in Iran, which countered this dominant perception. First, through content analysis of a number of women's blog entries, Akhavan showed that Iranian women's blogging activities are affected by their offline personal experience. Thus, she discussed that narrative about women's blogging in Iran should explore whether or how online texts are intertwined with the bloggers' experience. Second, she reported the often-ignored trend of the deployment of blogosphere by conservatives, uncovering that even the blog contents of conservative women are more in conformity with their on-the-ground activities rather than with their political orientation.

This thesis fills two major voids in the extant literature on the Internet and Iranian activism. First, there is no previous academic knowledge about the ways women's rights activism and other activist circles in Iran have been affected by the use of the Internet. Two studies which provided first-hand empirical evidence of the effect of the Internet on Iranian political activists both focussed on activists in the diaspora. The Ghorashi and Boersma (2009) case study of the Iranian diaspora transnational virtual network revealed the role of the Internet in facilitating interaction and a sense of shared identity between diaspora activists, Iranian NGOs, and activists inside Iran. The same result was reported by Michaelsen's (2016) investigation on Iranian political activism in exile: "The internet and social media have multiplied channels for connections between in- and outside and on a transnational scale (p. 14)." However, his interview study showed that digital communication and information exchange has enabled the Iranian state to keep activists outside Iran under surveillance. This present research closes this notable gap in the literature about the impacts of the Internet on an Iranian activist circle in the country. Its research questions explore, for the first time, the promises and pitfalls of Internet utilization for women's rights activism's public communication, internal relations, and print media presence.

4 For example, see her book "Electronic Iran: The Cultural Politics of an Online Evolution".

Second, there is a significant lack of empirical knowledge about activists' use of other types of Internet technologies other than blogs. To date, much of the research on women's rights activists and the Internet have examined individual activists' personal blogging practices. Two analyses on women's websites by Shirazi (2012) and Sreberny and Khiabany (2010) only contained history of the women's websites, as well as general information about covered topics. A recent article by Tahmasebi-Birgani (2017) concentrated on social networking sites' usage in women's rights activists' struggles for gender equality but failed to develop a methodological approach providing an in-depth account of the phenomenon. The author provided very brief observational analysis of one virtual campaign that was based outside Iran and had no on-the-ground presence or affiliation with the activists in Iran. The interview and observational analyses in this investigation generate fresh, in-depth insight into patterns of use and the impact of three Internet technologies that, at the time of data collection, were being utilized by women's rights activists to the greatest extent: e-mail groups, websites, and social networking sites (SNSs).

1.4 Thesis Outline

The remaining part of this thesis proceeds as follows: Chapter 2 begins the process of examination by reviewing the dynamics and characteristics of women's rights activism and the historical trajectories which need to be factored in. It begins by presenting a background on the emergence of women's rights discourse in Iran in the early 20th century, with its chief focus being on the activism after the 1979 revolution. It explores the dynamics of post-revolution women's rights activism, following the presentation of two aspects that are relevant to grasp this dynamic: fragmentation of political elite and controlled media. The chapter will go on to give an overview of the activism in the Internet age.

Chapter 3 is divided into two main parts. Aiming to set out the theoretical framework used to address the core objective of the thesis, the first part situates the research within the broader context of scholarly debates on information and communication technologies and the Internet for activism and social movements. Drawing on the theoretical and empirical discussion presented in the first part, and Chapter Two's reviews on women's rights activism, the next part of the chapter presents three research questions that direct the empirical investigation. Chapter 4, meanwhile, lays out the design of the research methods employed to examine the research questions.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 form the empirical part of this thesis. Chapter 5 responds to the first RQ. It presents findings in relation to the utilization and impacts of the Internet on the activists-

public communication. The discussions of this chapter concentrate on the activists' websites and SNSs as their main public communication platforms. The results are presented via five overarching interview themes that are supplemented and verified by observational findings. The first three themes uncover three welcoming impacts of Internet utilization on activists-public communication, while the next themes reveal two perils associated with these promises.

Chapter 6 supplies findings in relation to the second RQ. The four overarching interview themes and their associated observational insights, presented in this chapter, shed light on the impacts of the Internet on women's rights activists' internal relations. The first three themes suggest the promises of e-mail groups, and websites for activist groups' intra- and inter-relations. Finally, the fourth theme uncovers one harmful effect that has emerged from the growth of women's rights activists' personal SNSs profiles.

Drawing on interviews with activists and print media journalists, Chapter 7 sheds light on the third RQ. The findings about the impacts of activists' online media on the resonance of women's rights discourses in the country's press are presented via two overarching interview themes. The first uncovers two factors that manipulate the influence of activists' online sites on the press agenda. The second theme discloses three mechanisms through which activists' online sites become effective in the resonance of women's rights issues in the country's press. The final section of the empirical chapters summarizes the key findings and discusses them in the light of the existing studies presented in Chapter 3.

The discussion of key results, in light of grand theories that aided the development of the research conceptual framework is offered in the concluding chapter. In addition to the thesis theoretical contribution, Chapter 8 highlights recommendations for activists' future practice, afterwards going on to outline the main limitations of the research and suggestions for future studies.

CHAPTER 2

STUDYING IRANIAN WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVISM

This chapter analyses women's rights activism and the socio-political context from which it has arisen and in which it operates. It begins by presenting an historical account of the emergence of women's rights discourse in Iran in the early 20th century, but its main focus is on the activism after the 1979 revolution. This chapter provides an explanation of two aspects of the context that will help comprehend post-revolution women's rights activism: (a) political elite fragmentation, and (b) controlled media. Then it goes on to explain the dynamics of the activism, also influenced by these aspects. In so doing, it focuses on four distinct socio-political turning points: the revolutionary period of 1979 to 1988, the post-war 'Period of Construction', the 'Reform Era' of 1997-2004, and the Ahmadinejad and hardliners' administration. Finally the chapter supplies a picture of women's rights activism in the Internet age and its current status under Rouhani's presidency.

2.1 Women's Rights Discourse in Iran Before the 1979 Revolution

In the 1890s, a series of risings and political arguments were initiated by modernist and religious reformers that confronted the ruling regime of the time, the Qajar Dynasty. By 1905, major protests were centered around the granting of a constitution. (De Groot, 2010). The Persian Constitutional Revolution took place from 1905-1911, causing an immediate shift in the social location of power from the royal Shah (the king) to a national parliament, and radically transformed the country's despotic monarchy into that of a parliamentary monarchy (Abrahamian, 1979). The primary causes of the revolution were economic recession, the corruption of Qajar rulers, and the intervention by colonial powers into Iran's domestic affairs⁵ (Hashemi, 2010).

Many of the historical studies on Iranian women point to the turn of the twentieth century and, more specifically, the constitutional revolution period as the beginning of women's "awakening" and the spread of gender debates among intellectuals, modernists, nationalists, and anti-colonial forces (McElrone, 2005; Paidar, 1997, p. 76). The constitutional revolution and the

⁵ Although Iran was never formally colonized, colonial powers imposed considerable influence in Iran in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Bradley, 2007).

establishment of a constitutional monarchy, which proposed a vision of Iran as a modern society, became a starting point for women's social and political participation (Yeganeh, 1993). In the first place, women participated in the Constitutional Revolution as part of nationalist forces, regardless of specific women's issues. But as time passed, they started to raise their specific gender demands (Jahanshahrad, 2012).

Many women, who were closely related by marriage or blood to politically active men or religious figures, actively supported the constitutional movement that aimed to limit the unlimited power of the Shah and set up a parliamentary system (Hoodfar, 1999). These women formed secret and semi-secret associations called women's *anjumans*, an old Persian name that refers to a place of gathering for deliberation, that supported the constitutionalist movement (Afary, 1989). They helped organize strikes and boycotts, spread news, and encouraged the public to protest against foreign intervention, as well as the dictatorial rule of the Shah (Afary, 1989). However, when the movement achieved its aims, and the first constitution of Iran was written, women were denied the right to vote and no gender issues were even discussed in the constitution (Hoodfar, 1999). The parliamentarians announced that women had the right to demand education, but only one that would prepare them for their domestic responsibilities at home and in the family (Afary, 1989). Also, they were to be kept out of politics, something assumed to be the 'prerogative of men' (Afary, 1989).

From that point on, the political activities of Iranian women, which began focused on national matters, now mobilized around gender issues (Hoodfar, 1999). In their old and newly formed *anjumans*, in the capital and other big cities in the country, women started to raise their demands for social and political inclusion (Hoodfar, 1999). The women who participated in these *anjumans* were mostly from urban, privileged, and educated classes of the society (De Groot, 2010). They were either from those families of the religious elite who discussed Islam's disagreement with gender segregation, or the women were modernists, impressed by the activities and victories of women's rights campaigns in Western countries (De Groot, 2010; Mahdi, 2004). One of the first meetings of these women was held in January 1907, when ten resolutions were announced, above all for the right for women's education (Afary, 1989). As the government failed to support their demands, however, women held meetings and gave "garden parties" to raise funds for girls' schools (Najmabadi, 1993). These schools became popular among a certain segment of urban households, particularly the middle classes (Hoodfar, 1999).

In Tehran and other provincial towns, girls' schools began to flourish (Mahdi, 2004). By 1913, 63 girls' schools were established in Tehran, supervised by the Women's Congress on Education (Mahdi, 2004).

These women's activities to achieve educational demands brought about gender consciousness and encouraged the development of women's political discourse (Hoodfar, 1999). Women's associations held meetings for the sole purpose of discussing women-related issues (Hoodfar, 1999). Also, for the first time in Iran, women tried to spread awareness of women's problems through the establishment of women-specific publications. In 1910, the first women's newspaper began publication in Iran (Afary, 1989). The eight page weekly newspaper, *Danesh* (Knowledge), aspired to educate women on topics of interest to women (Afary, 1989). In 1912, another women's journal, *Shikufah* (Blossom), was launched in Tehran with a focus on women's education (Kashani-Sabet, 2005).

Contribution to the Constitutional Revolution was the beginning of a new era for Iranian women, the beginning of the organized participation of women in political activities and the struggle for their rights (Mahdi, 2004). In this era, the necessity of women's education was set up and women's issues became part of the public and national concern (Paidar, 1997, p. 76).

In 1921, Reza Pahlavi came into power through a British-supported coup, which seized power from the Qajar rulers. He announced himself the first Shah of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925. Inspired by the European model of society and modernization initiations conducted by Ataturk in Turkey, and also as a way to weaken the traditional social function of the clergy, Reza Shah initiated a rapid forced process of modernization of the country (Keddie, 2007; Najmabadi, 1987). With regards to gender politics, his reforms toward modernity are remembered mostly by the promotion of women's education (Afary, 1996). The women's modernization project of Reza Shah also demanded that all Iranian women remove their veils in public, to receive greater opportunities for education and state employment. In practice, the benefits of employment and education were extended to a very few, but the violent enforcement of unveiling harassed and troubled many (Amin, 2008). Also, while one can say the government's policy on women's social participation like education and employment led to meaningful changes, the family policy, by contrast, lacked such reforms (Yeganeh, 1993). The 1936 Civil Code gave men the right to polygamy, divorce, and child custody, and prohibited women from education, employment, and travelling without their husband's permission (Yeganeh, 1993).

In the first year of Reza Shah's monarchy, a variety of independent organizations and publications that were formed around women's issues remained active (Afary, 1996). However, as his government became stronger, Reza Shah acted against any independent and spontaneous social and political organizations (Paidar, 1997, p. 105). Thus, after the 1920s, many women's organizations were either officially dismantled or lost members due to strict control and censorship of their activities and publications (Hoodfar, 1999). The forced closure and members' imprisonment of pro-Communist women's organizations like *Bidariye Zanan* (Awakening of Women), *Shokuhe Zanan* (Women's Prosperity), *Jameye Zanan* (Women's Society), as well as non-Communist women's newspapers like *Zanane Iran* (Women of Iran), *Donyaye Zanan* (Women's Universe), which had been publishing for thirteen years, are among such examples (Paidar, 1997, p. 102). Also, restrictions were imposed on Iranian women's communication with regional and international women's movements (Hoodfar, 1999). The fate of the Iran Left-Wing Patriotic Women's League (1922-32) illustrates the situation (Afary, 1996). In 1932, the organization held its second regional conference of Women of the East. Participants, who had come from a variety of regional countries, called for equal wages for equal work, greater political rights for women, changes in family law, and more opportunities for women's education (Afary, 1996). Following this event, Reza Shah ordered the Patriotic Women's League to be closed, as he would not tolerate any type of grassroots activity, let alone one composed of women activists (Afary, 1996).

At the same time, Reza Shah tried to integrate many vocal and talented women into structures of his own, which successfully threatened the independence of the women's organizations (Paidar, 1997, p. 102). The state set up an official organization called *Kanun-i Banovan* (Ladies' Center) in 1935, which was limited to occupational training, education, and charity activities (Paidar, 1997, p. 102). By 1935, all efforts to establish grassroots women's rights groups had been co-opted by the modernizing state (Afary, 1996). This left the more radical women's rights activists with three options: tone down their more radical demands and join the government-sponsored organizations; stand instead with the conservative opposition to the Shah, which mainly included Islamic clerics; or unite with the left-wing political parties. Since the opposition groups, Islamists, and Marxist intellectuals were either co-opted or repressed by the state, with little hope of accomplish even some of their objectives, most of the activists resigned themselves to align with the Reza Shah modernist government (Afary, 1996).

In 1941, both the UK and the Soviet Union invaded Iran during the World War II, forcing Reza Shah to leave power to his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who formed the second Pahlavi state (1941-79) (Bradley, 2007). In a more democratic period of mainly parliamentary rule from 1941 to 1953, both the religious right and leftist parties experienced a revival (Keddie, 2007). Independent women's rights activities, too, resumed during this period (Yeganeh, 1993). Women's organizations were re-established and many progressive women's organizations - the most active, the women's branch of the Tudeh Party (the Left-Wing Party), which attracted many students, teachers, and secular women and men - were founded in the 1940s (Beck & Nashat, 2004, p. 24). The 1940s also brought a new wave of optimism and a renewed interest in journalism, which lasted from 1941 through the popular movement for oil nationalization in the early 1950s. A total of 373 publications were active during the Oil Nationalization Movement, including many women's titles (Khiabany, 2010, p. 186).

The Oil Nationalization Movement was led by Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq and resulted in the establishment of the National Iranian Oil Company, which took control over the oil industry from the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The nationalization of the oil industry and mounting friction between the prime minister and the Shah led to the 1953 MI6/CIA-coordinated coup to overthrow Mossadegh (Abrahamian, 2001). Mohammad Reza Shah, who fled Iran during the coup, was reinstated by the countries backing the coup, and who continued ruling Iran with increasing authoritarianism. Many of the previous decade's political freedoms were curtailed. The Tudeh party and its women's wing were banned and it became extremely hard for opposition groups and parties to be openly active. (Beck & Nashat, 2004, p. 24). In 1961, the new Kennedy government pursued a different foreign policy with regard to Iran, as the United States felt threatened by the communists' 1958 revolution in Iraq. Thus was the Shah ordered to carry out new reform projects, resulting in a 1963 government program called the White Revolution, a six-point reform program that included Iranian women's enfranchisement (Afary, 1996).

From 1953 forward, Reza Shah's strategy of centralization and co-optation of women's rights activism was resumed by his son (Sanasarian, 1982). Just as women's rights activists' voices were gaining strength, a program was re-launched to bring their independent activities under control (Sanasarian, 1982). In 1966, the Shah approved formation of the High Council of Iranian Women's Organizations (WOI), a new umbrella organization whose president was the

Shah's twin sister (Sanasarian, 1982). In 1967, following the reforms of the White Revolution, the WOI presented a bill to the parliament known as the Family Protection Law (FPL), which restricted some of the rights that were given to men in the Civil Code of 1936, such as arbitrary divorce, polygamy, and men's rights to child custody (Paidar, 1997, p. 155). Despite the state's pretense that the main objectives of the law were to liberate women and enhance their position, there were other motives, such as population control (Paidar, 1997, p. 155). In addition, Mohammad Reza Shah used the FPL as a move to weaken the religious power of the clerics (Brooks, 2008). The law put judgments for marriage and divorce in the hands of the Family Court, taking it away from the clerics. The FPL was promptly reversed by Ayatollah Khomeini after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Brooks, 2008). Despite such decisions, the WOI remained unpopular with the opposition and many ordinary women, who argued it was directly sponsored by an undemocratic regime with authoritarian policies (Afary, 1996).

Beside women's organizations, women's press was also affected by the state control and centralization process. Numerous independent women's publications were banned. In their place, big publishing firms supported by the state published women-specific magazines that devoted most of their pages to celebrity news, portraits of the royal family, foreign visitors, health and beauty, housekeeping, and, only on occasion, some serious articles on changes to the family law (Khiabany, 2010, p. 187).

During the reign of the Pahlavis, the state became the major source for change in the status of women (Mahdi, 2004). Iranian women were granted education and employment rights, enfranchisement, and an improved position in the family law. To symbolize this modernizing state, its rulers increased the number of women in executive positions and enhanced their opportunities in the public arena (Mahdi, 2004). The increased social participation of women enhanced their self-perception. In practice, however, only upper and middle class women who had enough social and economic support to take advantage of such reforms benefited. (Hoodfar, 1999). In addition, these rights came with a major cost for advocates of women's rights. In Iran, like other modernizing authoritarian nationalist rulers in the region, such as Turkey, Tunisia, and Egypt, the move toward the enhancement of women's position in society was associated with suppression and centralization of autonomous initiatives (Keddie, 2007). Independent women's rights organizations and their publications were either officially dismantled, especially those of leftists, or incorporated and centralized by the state (Hoodfar, 1999; Keddie, 2007).

2.2 The Dynamic of Women's Rights Activism After the 1979 Revolution

Increasing political repression after the 1953 coup, Washington's interference in Iran's domestic policies, economic corruption, and the rapid westernization of the country all gave birth to a broad national resistance movement which resulted in the 1979 Revolution; and later the replacement of Iran's monarchy by the Islamic Republic (Afary, 1996; Brooks, 2008). The movement gained momentum amongst a collection of political groups (leftists, nationalists, and Islamists) and social forces (middle class women and men, intellectuals, the working class, and the urban poor) (Moghadam, 2002). Women were a central part of the Iranian Revolution, participating in protests and becoming, for the West, an important visual symbol of the uprising against the Westernization of the Shah and the Pahlavi reign (Brooks, 2008). As the old regime, despite its feminist pretenses, was known for degrading women's social position, it became the aim of the revolutionaries to advance women's interests (Halper, 2005). This created a completely new space for women to actively and regularly participate in meetings and demonstrations criticizing the autocratic and Western-oriented modernization approach followed by the Shah (Halper, 2005).

Various women's organizations, which had their own publications and campaigns, were founded during and immediately after the Revolution. The communist *Ettehad-e Melli Zan* (National Union of Women), which published *Barabari* (Equality) and *Zan Dar Mobareze* (Women in Protest); the secular *Anjoman Rahaei Zan* (The Society of Women's Emancipation), published *Rahaei Zan* (Emancipation of Women); the Islamist *Zanane Tarafdare Nehzate Azadie Iran* (Women Adherents of Freedom Movement of Iran); and the nationalist *Sazman-e Zanane Jebheye Meli* (Women's Organization of National Front) were among the most active societies in the Revolution (Farhadpour, 2012). Women's political protests involved not only members of established opposition groups, but also students, housewives and ordinary women from more traditional sectors of society. They participated in both peaceful and violent mass demonstrations, fought in street battles and joined strikes and boycotts. (Paidar, 1997, p. 211). Such large-scale, organized, and very active participation of women in the revolutionary upheavals not only had a profound effect on the politics of the era, it altered the consciousness of many women, particularly working class women, about their political potential (Keddie, 2000).

A close look at women's rights activism after the Islamic revolution makes it evident that the fragmentation of the political elites, particularly toward autonomy of civil activities and

organizations, along with freedom of the media, has influenced the dynamics of this activism. Thus, before proceeding to review the activism in post-revolution Iran, this section provides background to political factions within Iran's political environment. It also explains political elites' struggle over freedom of the media, particularly the press, as a key communication medium for activists. Then the review of post-Revolution Iranian women's rights activism demonstrates the dynamics of the activism within the context of these aspects and within four distinct socio-political turning points. These periods may be referred to as the revolutionary period of 1979 to 1988, the post-war 'Period of Construction' (1988-1997), the 'Reform Era' of 1997-2004, and the hardliner Ahmadinejad administration (2005-2013). The section on review of Ahmadinejad's era ends with a brief explanation of the activism's current status under the Rouhani administration.

2.2.1 Political elite fragmentation

In a national referendum a few months after the 1979 revolution, the monarchy of Pahlavi regime was replaced by the Islamic Republic. Iran's Islamic Republic has a very unique form of government, one preserving both democratic and Islamic religious principles (Bashiriyeh, 1997). The main political institutions in Iran are the Office of the Supreme Leader, the Office of the President, the Parliament, and the Guardian Council⁶.

Iran was led by highly conservative elites in the first decade after the Revolution, during which the country was preoccupied with promoting the Islamization of state and society (Vaez, 2004). The foreign policy, meanwhile, was to first rule out both the United State, representing Western capitalism, and the Soviet Union, representing socialism; and second, to 'export the revolution' in order to free Muslim and non-Muslim countries from the domination of oppressive and corrupting states (Rakel, 2007). Domestically, at the most general level, this post-revolutionary period manifested itself in a radical re-definition of social priorities, as all political parties involved in the Revolution shared the view that moral and social corruption was the main source of societal ills during the Pahlavi regime (Najmabadi, 1987). In the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution, the anti-imperialism of the radical secular left was itself tainted by the West and did not offer any evident advantage over the more genuinely anti-foreign solution of returning to an

⁶ This council is composed of six experts in Islamic Law, all selected by the Supreme Leader of Iran, as well as six jurists elected by the Iranian Parliament. Any bill passed by Parliament must be reviewed and approved by the Guardian Council in order to become law.

original Islam (Najmabadi, 1987). In this situation, according to Bashiriyeh known as Iran's father of political sociology, 'the discourse of ideological traditionalism' reversed many aspects of the 'modern discourse' established during the Pahlavi era and reinforced the positions of the bazaar, the clergy, and religion even as nationalism, secularism and industrialization were weakened (cited in Jahanshahrad, 2012).

With the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, the death of Ayatollah Khomeini and the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani, the new era called the 'Period of Construction' began (Bahramitash, 2007). To boost the war-torn economy of Iran, the new government adopted neo-liberal economic policies based on free trade, reduction of the role of the state, liberalization of the market, social program reduction, privatization, and re-integration into the international economy (Bahramitash, 2007; Rakel, 2007). "Although Rafsanjani encountered factional opposition from traditionalists or conservatives that tainted his legacy in effecting political and economic reform, this period was critical in facilitating significant domestic, social, and political transformation (Vakil, 2011, p. 101)." In the less restrictive atmosphere of the Rafsanjani administration, new reformist political and religious ideas emerged. Utilizing the press, the religious and secular scholars, as well as former revolutionaries, started criticizing the failings of the revolution, giving birth to a reform movement in Iran that would flourish under the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (Vakil, 2013).

With the victory of Mohammad Khatami in the 1997 presidential election, and by the domination of the reformists who won the majority of the seats in the 2000 parliamentary election, Iran entered the so-called 'Reform Era'. From 1997 onward, the main political factions of the country were known as 'reformists' and 'conservatives'. While both groups are firm believers in the general political structure of the Islamic Republic, they differ in terms of ideological and political visions (Kamrava & Hasan-Yari, 2004). The conservatives, who represent the interests of the traditional economic sector (the bazaars), a dogmatic clergy, and a highly religious public, emphasize a narrow and strict conception of Islam, along with the return to the ideals of the Islamic Revolution and antagonism with the West - the US, in particular (Rakel, 2007, 2009). On the other hand, the reformists' political elites, who are mainly intellectuals and clerics whose interpretations of Islam differ from those of the conservatives, advocate reform, modernity, and civil society (Kamrava & Hasan-Yari, 2004). Within this political spectrum, there are moderate figures and groups whose political views are closer to the

reformists, but do not advocate factionalism, and who otherwise have good relations with like-minded figures in both political camps (Mousavian, 2013).

“The shift in the nation’s social-political life” has been so profound (Tajik, cited in Behraves, 2014, p. 265) that Khatami’s presidency and his reform programs were signified by Iranian intellectuals as the Reform Movement. The Khatami administration achieved breakthroughs in reforming many aspects of the power system: promoting civil and individual liberties, expanding civil society, easing restrictions on print media, forming a new political culture based on Islamic reformism and modernism, establishing a balance between market liberalism and social justice (Behraves, 2014), and adopting a foreign diplomacy promoting peaceful coexistence and reconciliation with neighbors and the Western powers (Vaez, 2004). However, the reformist breakthroughs led the conservative hardliners, who held the main power over the major state institutions like the Guardian Council, the Expediency Council⁷, and the judiciary system, to resist pro-reform forces. Their strategies to limit the ability of the government and parliament to carry out reforms, and their crackdowns on the reformist press, were effective in slowing down and frustrating the reform process (Gheissari & Nasr, 2005).

In the 2005 presidential election the conservatives supported Ahmadinejad, one of the strongest opponents of the reformists (Rakel, 2009). Prior to the election leading to his presidency, Ahmadinejad had never held elected office, and was almost unknown in the international arena. Nevertheless, and separate from the support of conservatives, his promises of more economic support to the poor and spending Iran’s oil income on improving basic living conditions for Iranians received large support from rural and urban lower class Iranians (Bahramitash, 2007; Hasan, 2007). He won the election against reformist rivals enjoying support of the modern middle class, intellectuals, students, and progressive clerics (Morady, 2010). He targeted the lower class that might have found the reform rhetoric too abstract to be relevant to the realities of their everyday lives (Sameti, 2007). With the parliamentary election of 2004, in which conservatives formed a majority, followed by the coming to power of a conservative president, the reformists lost significant political ground.

The hardliners’ 2005 electoral triumph gave them a golden opportunity to inhibit civil society associations and dissent voices (Rahimi & Gheytonchi, 2008). Ahmadinejad’s Minister

⁷ The Council members who are appointed by the Supreme Leader determine the interests of the system in cases where the Parliament and the Guardian Council cannot reach an agreement (Kamrava & Hasan-Yari, 2004)

of Culture tightened its control over the press, and intensified efforts to shut down any dissenting publications in order to suppress critical voices in the media and civil society (Media Sustainability Index Iran, 2009). Only after Ahmadinejad led various efforts during his two-term presidency to steadily reverse progress previously made with regard to freedom of the press and the opening up of the civil society sphere under Khatami, did the election of a moderate political figure, Hasan Rouhani, offer Iranians new hope for change.

In summer 2013, the people signaled their rejection of President Ahmadinejad's reactionary policies with the election of Rouhani's government of 'Prudence and Hope'. Rouhani is an insider who has secured official positions since the 1979 Revolution through professionalism and an avoidance of extremist positions, allying himself with most of the prominent players in the Iranian political system (Parsi, 2013). He declared, during his campaign, that he could recover Iran's international standing, improve its economy, and solve the country's social dilemmas. The composition of Rouhani's government, and statements made by both him and his ministers, signaled a deliberate endeavor to deviate from Ahmadinejad's policies and ease restrictions on society (Menashri, 2013). Today, Rouhani's foreign⁸ and domestic policies are largely criticized by hardliner conservatives.

2.2.2 Media control

The media sphere in Iran has been largely affected by the reformists and conservatives' conflict over the definition, role, and control of the media (Khiabany, 2010, p. 72). In general terms, conservatives call for tighter control of the media, arguing that independent and free media undermine religious and revolutionary values, with the potential to politically and culturally polarize Iranian society (Barracough, 2001; Tarock, 2001). The reformists and moderates, on the other hand, advocate a greater degree of freedom for media, since they regard media as the key area for raising alternative socio-political viewpoints and gaining public support of same (Barracough, 2001). Since the conservatives control the broadcasting content of the country, it is press that has been the main battleground for the reformists and civil society (Sameti, 2007).

⁸ The international agreement on the nuclear program of Iran was reached in 2015, following a series of meeting and diplomatic efforts between Iran's foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, and the P5+1 plus the European Union. Iran made nuclear concessions in the agreement in exchange for the lifting of international sanctions.

There are no private TV and radio channels in Iran. The state-run ‘Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting’ (IRIB), as the largest media organization in the country, is in charge of domestic and international broadcasting. The IRIB is an active member of the Asian Broadcasting Union (ABU), the Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development (AIBD), and an affiliated member of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) (Khiabany, 2010, p. 173). IRIB airs both nationally and internationally, and is also streamed online⁹. The organization largely reflects the views of conservatives as all its appointed heads come from the conservative pool (BBC Monitoring, 2007). The Iranian constitution mandates a supervisory board for the organization with representatives from the presidency, the parliament, and the judiciary. However, they hold no executive role in the organization and only receive reports from the IRIB’s chief (Iran const., art. 175). The IRIB has been frequently criticized, mainly by reformists, for its biased coverage of domestic political and social issues (Samii, 1999).

In contrast to the state-controlled broadcasting sector, which reflects the harmonious views of one faction, the Iranian press has been relatively controversial and diverse (Khiabany, 2010, p. 163), reflecting various factions. Yet some, particularly those of reformists, have taken a step further and tried to cross a line commonly known as the ‘red line’ in Iran of consensual political practices (Barraclough, 2001). The reformist press has managed to raise political consciousness and popular discontent with the status quo (Sameti, 2007). Among the country’s most circulated reformist newspapers are *Etemad*¹⁰ (Trust), *Shargh*¹¹ (East) and *Aftab-e Yazd*¹² (Yazd’s sunshine). The conservative publications consistently accuse the reformists and their publications of being heretics, anti-Islamic, anti-revolutionary, and promoters of Western political and cultural views (Sokooti, 2002). Among the most prominent of the conservative newspapers are

9 live.irib.ir

10 *Etemad* is a moderate reformist newspaper, launched in 2002, and shut down twice, each time later being allowed to resume publishing. (Rafizadeh & Alimardani, 2013).

11 Regarded as the most leading reformist newspaper, *Shargh* was founded in 2003 and has since been shut down four times by the conservative judiciary (Rafizadeh & Alimardani, 2013).

12 Launched as a regional paper in the Yazd Province, it went national in 2000. It is affiliated with the reformists’ association of Combatant Clerics and former President Khatami.

*Keyhan*¹³ (Galaxy), *Resalat* (Message)¹⁴, and *Jam-e Jam*¹⁵ (Cup of Life). Besides conservative and reformist publications, some newspapers represent the views of political pressure groups that have emerged across the political spectrum (BBC Monitoring, 2007).

Similar to many democratic states, the newspaper industry within Iranian civil society is supposed to function as an intermediary institution between state and the society (Sameti, 2007). While reformists, in particular, have been largely successful in utilizing this potential, the politics of the press law have significantly complicated this issue and limited the binary division between Iranian state and civil society (Sameti, 2007). Iran's latest amended press law, ratified in 1986, grants freedom of the press: 'The press have the right to publish the opinions, constructive criticisms, suggestions and explanations of individuals and government officials for public information' (Iran const., art. 3, cited in Khiabany, 2010, p. 143). 'No government or non-government official should resort to coercive measures against the press to publish an article or essay, or attempt to censure and control the press' (Iran const., art. 4 cited in Khiabany, 2010, p. 143). This same law, however, imposes two main limitations on the activities of the press. First, it prohibits contents that imply political offenses, and those which violate the principles of Sharia, Iran's constitution, or the rights of the public (Iran const., art. 6). Second, it bans publications without legal permission to operate or with a canceled license (Iran const., art. 7). While licenses are granted by the Press Supervisory Board¹⁶ (Iran const., art. 11), offenses

13 The *Keyhan* daily is one of the publications of the *Keyhan* media institution founded before the Revolution. It is affiliated with the Office of the Supreme Leader and maintains close ties with security and judiciary officials. It is considered to be the most influential hard-line conservative newspaper in Iran. (Rafizadeh & Alimardani, 2013).

14 Established a few years after the Revolution, *Resalat* maintains strong links to traditional bazaar merchants who are conservatives in favor of a market economy (BBC Monitoring, 2007).

15 *Jam Jam* is owned by and reflects the conservative views of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting network (IRIB).

16 The PSB is composed of seven members, with the Minister of Culture as chairman, a judge elected by the Supreme Judiciary Council, one representative from the parliament, one university professor appointed by the Minister of Science and Higher Education, one of the press managing directors elected by the press, a religious seminarian appointed by Qom religious school, and finally, a member of the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution (Iran const., art. 10)

attributed to the press are examined by the competent courts in the presence of a press jury (Iran const., art. 34).

Thus, the definition of political offenses in the press law that is open to interpretational abuse, the composition of the Press Supervisory Board, and conservatives dominance of the judiciary have paved the way for hardliners to repress the reformists' and independent press (Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010). Particularly since 2000, and following the initial outburst of the reformist press, conservative elements within the judiciary have charged numerous newspapers with the publication of offensive content, and temporarily or permanently revoked their licenses (Sameti, 2007). Even during the 2013 presidential campaign, the hardliner conservatives crackdown on the press extended beyond reformists to include some conservative print outlets covering banned topics (Wojcieszak, Brouillette, & Smith, 2013). Nevertheless, despite such restrictions, Iran has a vibrant press industry, with a total number of national and officially registered publications at 4,054: 603 daily newspapers and 3,451 journals and magazines (Iran's Ministry of Culture, 2017 December).

2.2.3 Women's rights activism in the revolutionary period of 1979 to 1988

The political environment of Iran during the revolutionary period, which lasted until the end of the Iran– Iraq war in 1988, was dominated by a politicized and ideological definition of Islam, and the increased power of the state and autonomy from civil society (Jahanshahrad, 2012). The “woman question”, was immediately put on the agenda as religious forces gave gender issues a key role in differentiating life under a future Islamic government from that of the regime of the Shah (Halper, 2005). The Islamic Republic's gender policies were based on the Islamization of families and the nation. As a first step, this required a codification of the 'Islamic family' (Yeganeh, 1993). The Family Court and the Family Protection Law of 1967 were quickly abolished, and policies regarding marriage, family planning, familial relations, divorce, and custody were developed that would establish Islamic standards for Iranian housewives (Yeganeh, 1993). The second phase associated with this process established the degree of women's participation in national development (Yeganeh, 1993). In order to enable the Islamic nation to benefit from the creative qualities of its female citizens, policies were formulated for women's education, employment, and political participation (Yeganeh, 1993). The new Islamic state aimed at incorporating women into a national vision promising them equal rights and an important role in defending the revolution, albeit within the confines of their central role in the

family (Sameh, 2010). Therefore, the third aspect of the Islamic gender policies was concerned with setting strategies “to enable the family and the nation to remain in harmony in relation to women” (Yeganeh, 1993, p. 10). Policies were thus set up on gender segregation to de-sexualize male-female social contact in order to protect the sanctity of the Islamic family (Yeganeh, 1993).

The revolutionary period in Iran is defined by many scholars as a simultaneous closure and opening period for women (e.g. Afshar, 1996; Hoodfar, 1999; Keddie, 2000; Moghadam, 2002; Najmabadi, 1998); “Years of hardship, years of growth”, as Najmabadi (1998) described. The elimination of women judges, the dismissal of large numbers of professional women from government jobs, and the repeal of women’s rights within the family indicated a serious defeat for women who had been promised greater equality under the Islamic state (Keddie, 2000; Sameh, 2010). But it was specifically that promise that enabled Muslim women’s rights activists to use Islamic discourse for actual reforms in women-related policies (Sameh, 2010). In fact, the Islamization policies of the revolutionary state had made women react to the state’s gender policies by introducing a new discourse under the flag of Islamic feminism (Jahanshahrad, 2012). Islamic feminism emphasized the fact that the discriminating policies of the revolutionary Islamic state emerged from misguided male interpretations of Islam's holy texts, in contrast to the principles of the true Islam (Barlow & Akbarzadeh, 2008).

Within the very system of the revolutionary state, Islamic feminists gained more participatory opportunities and public attention than their secular counterparts fighting to raise women's issues regardless of Islamic principles (Ahmadi, 2006). A few months after the Revolution, secular activists founded *Komiteye Hamahangi Zanan* (Women’s Solidarity Committee) with the aim of providing wider access to education, public life, and platforms for the expression of debates on gender issues (Farhadpour, 2012). *Etehade Enghelabi Zanane Mobarez* (The Revolutionary Unity of Militant Women) was founded as a women’s wing of the Communist Party of Workers and Peasants and published their *Sepedih Sorkh* (Red Dawn) journal (Farhadpour, 2012). *Jamiate Zanan Mobarez* (The Militant Women’s Society) was the women’s division of the Union of Iranian Communists, which also had its own paper *Zanane Mobarez* (Militant Women) (Farhadpour, 2012). Although important, the secular women’s efforts were neither effective nor widespread, mainly because of barriers blocking secular discourse within the framework of an Islamic Republic (Ahmadi, 2006; Halper, 2005; Hoodfar, 1999). “An ‘inside force’, a ‘from within’ perspective, has been needed to alter the dominant

fundamentalist discourse. Iranian Muslim women, particularly elite women, have answered this exigency” (Ahmadi, 2006, p. 34).

The most influential Islamist women's groups, *Jameye Zanane Enghelabe Eslami* (The Women's Society of the Islamic Revolution), was founded shortly after the revolution, with the aim of developing culturally appropriate ways to build a society that would end women's oppression (Paidar, 1997, p. 240). Most of the organization's members were educated in the West: Fereshte Hashemi, Shahin Tabatabaei, and Zahra Rahnavard - who took over the editing of *Etell'at-e Banovan* (Ladies' Information) and changed its title to *Rah-e Zaynab* (Zaynab's Path) - all held PhDs from American universities. Others were connected to respected religious leaders or were known for their political activities against the Pahlavi Regime (Paidar, 1997, p. 240). The presence of prominent women such as Azam Talaghani, who had family links to religious-political leaders, facilitated the association's access to the country's press (Hoodfar, 1999; Keller, 2010). Taleghani set up another women's organization called the *Moaseseye Zanane Mosalman* (Islamic Women Institute) and launched the monthly *Payam-e Hajar* (Hagar's Message) (Mir-hosseini, 2002), that raised serious questions about the necessity of reinterpreting Islamic laws (Kian, 1997). Other Islamist journals and newspapers published in this period included *Zane Rouz* (Today's Women), a formerly pro-Pahlavi magazine, which kept the old name but transformed into a completely religiously oriented women's journal; *Mahbobeh* (A Female Name), published in English; *Vahdat Eslami Banovan* (The Unity of Islamic woman), in Urdu; and *Al-Tahereh* (Pure), in Arabic (Farhadpour, 2012).

By the mid-1980s, the Islamic state was consolidated. The Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) period, which intensified conservative Islamism, left no place for secular and left-wing organizations in the political scene of Iran. In this situation, Muslim women's right activists and their publications - above all *Payame Hajar* (Hagar's Message) and *Zane Ruz* (Today's Women) - became platforms for opposing the new discriminating laws.

The case best exemplifying the role of the Islamic feminists' press was the objection to the annulment of the 1967 Family Protection Law immediately after the Revolution. In essence, this annulment meant returning to polygamy, a revival temporary marriage, free divorce for men, and automatic child custody to fathers (Keddie, 2000). Women's journals broadcasted the negative consequences of such decisions mainly through publishing stories of women's suffering in the hands of despotic husbands, including stories of wife-beatings, suicide, and the loss of children

(Keddie, 2000). They printed open letters to religious leaders asking if this was the way to achieve Islamic justice (Hoodfar, 1999). Parliamentary women representatives also made similar arguments; for example, against the official encouragement of polygamy. They produced Islamist-based arguments to strictly limit polygamy, positing that court permission should be required (Keddie, 2000). The Islamic activists' press and women parliamentarian efforts created a serious outcry from Islamists and secular revolutionaries alike who noted the lack of legislation replacing the abrogated family law (Osanloo, 2008). Important religious leaders complained of confusion over the laws. Even judges called for a regularization of the judicial process for family-law disputes (Osanloo, 2008). As a result of such efforts, during 1984-85, twelve conditions were printed into all marriage contracts as grounds for women to get divorced, provided husbands signed them all (Keddie, 2000). Also, second marriages were allowed only with the first wife's consent (Vakil, 2011).

2.2.4 Women's rights activism in the 1988-1997 post-war era: the "Period of Construction"

Women's role during the Iraq-Iran war period (1980-88) was multifaceted (Yeganeh, 1993). Initially the image of the true Muslim woman was rigorously limited to that of mother and wife who sacrifices her sons and husband for the Islamic cause and providing ideological support (Kian, 1997; Yeganeh, 1993). But as the war progressed, and the possibility of an early resolution with Iraq faded, the approach to women's involvement became much more pragmatic and systematic. The government started to mobilize women for military action and Ayatollah Khomeini instructed them to receive military training in order to defend their country (Yeganeh, 1993).

The end of war with Iraq and the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani marked the beginning of a new phase for gender debate in Iran, resulting in the lifting of some major restrictions on women mainly in terms of employment and public activities (Khiabany, 2010, p. 194). As part of his liberalization and development program, Rafsanjani soon realized that enhancing women's participation in society, rather than their marginalization, furthered his agenda, and boosted Iran's political legitimacy and economic productivity (Vakil, 2011, p. 101). The state's encouragement and economic pressure on families due to the inflation of the war years persuaded women - many of whom had never been employed outside the home - to join the work force (Halper, 2005). President Rafsanjani's declaration that Iran was "in need of a women labor

force” even forced power elites to ask secular women professionals dismissed from their posts during the revolutionary period to return to their positions (Kian, 1997).

The new role of women in society required the government to implement more favorable policies to women. That was when a transformation of gender rhetoric and policy began, and the government set up a promotion of women’s social participation as one of its overt goals (Halper, 2005). In 1988, the state established the Social and Cultural Council of Women, which was responsible for studying the legal, social, and economic problems of Iranian women in order to provide recommendations to the executive branch of the government (Bahramitash & Hooglund, 2011, p. 50). This council had an impact on major women's issues. For instance, in 1989, after numerous meetings that included university presidents and cabinet ministers, the council succeeded in lifting restrictions on the enrollment of women in the technical and scientific faculties (Bahramitash & Hooglund, 2011, p. 50). With respect to women’s employment, the government issued an official document on female employment in 1992 urging government organizations to enable women to fulfill both their domestic and paid duties; for instance, equal pay for equal work, and paid time off for women’s ‘mothering obligations’ (Afshar, 1996). In a similar move in 1992, the Bureau of Women's Affairs, a subsidiary of the presidential office, was created to detect problems and shortcomings and propose solutions that would enhance women's status and their social, political, cultural, and economic role (Kian, 1997).

The new economic, social, and demographic post-war realities, and the need to mollify the restive, youthful population, pushed the government to authorize relative freedom of the press and NGOs (Vakil, 2013). By the mid-1990s, numerous non-governmental or quasi-governmental organizations dealing with women’s issues were created (Fazaeli, 2007). The unprecedented public presence of women, particularly those from the middle class, gave them self-confidence and new social skills that encouraged many to volunteer for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social activities (Bayat, 2007). Thanks to Mohammad Khatami, the liberal minded Minister of Culture, several hundred new journals and newspapers, including women-specific publications, began publishing (Kian, 1997), notably the independent *Zanan* (Women) magazine, which later became the main platform for women’s rights discourses, founded by Shahla Sherkat, award-winning journalist and prominent women’s rights activist, in 1992 (Farhadpour, 2012).

Zanan critically discussed socio-political, legal, and economic issues from the perspective of women's interests and presented new approaches for addressing women's problems (Jahanshahrad, 2012). Among the important contributions of the magazine in the early years of its publication was a series of articles published under a female pseudonym discussing early decisions of Islamic Republic authorities to prohibit women's authority in religious and judiciary institutions. Following the *Zanan* outreach, the debate was continued by both Islamists and secular gender activists (Bahramitash & Hooglund, 2011). Conservative journals like *Payame Zan* (Women's Message), published in the religious city of Qom, continued the debate by quoting from those moderate clerics who did not perceive women's being judges to be against Sharia rules (Keddie, 2000). Secular activists, who gained greater freedom during the construction era, contributed mainly by publishing articles in women's journals like *Zanan* and *Farzaneh* (Wise), a quarterly women's study journal first published in 1996 both in English and in Farsi (Farhadpour, 2012). Secular activists, including lawyers, sociologists, political scientists, and writers, criticized women's exclusion from the bench mainly from the perspective of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international conventions to which the Islamic Republic was signatory (Bahramitash & Hooglund, 2011). These efforts, associated with the unfair treatment of women in the justice system, particularly in family courts, pressured the government to accept women's participation in the judiciary system as consulting judges (Hoodfar, 1999). According to the new law, women could now be appointed as examining magistrates, counselors in the administrative courts, family courts, and counselor in the Office of the Protection of Minors (Kian, 2011). While this compromise was welcomed, Iranian activists are still concerned that women judges do not have the power to issue final verdicts (Keddie, 2000).

2.2.5 Women's rights activism during the Reform Era of 1997-2004

President Rafsanjani's term ended in 1997 with the landslide victory of Mohammad Khatami in the presidential election. He came to symbolize the 'Reform Movement' which had the tremendous support of youth and women (Bahramitash, 2007). Iranian women provided Khatami, the former administration's Minister of Culture, with a vital base of support, as they believed that under the reformists, women's issues could be raised more easily than under the conservative candidates (Barlaw & Akbarzadeh, 2008). Khatami received massive support from a diverse spectrum of women from upper, middle, and working class backgrounds, from both the

secular and Islamist camps, and from both the urban and rural parts of the country (Vakil, 2011, p. 138).

Once in power, the reformist president had to respond to voters demanding greater social and political freedoms and a commitment to human and gender rights (Bahramitash, 2007). Women's political, legal, and social status became one of the central concerns of his administration. Early in his first term, Khatami elevated the Bureau of Women's Affairs to the cabinet level, changing its name to the Bureau of Women's Participation and tripled its annual budget (Osanloo, 2008). He appointed Zahra Shojaee, longtime women's right activist, as the center's director, also his adviser on women's affairs, and Iran's representative on women's issues abroad (Osanloo, 2008). For the first time since the 1979 Revolution, women were employed in top government posts, Khatami also appointing Massoumeh Ebtekar, the US-educated lecturer and editor of *Farzaneh* (Wise) as Vice-President in Charge of Environmental affairs; and Azam Nouri as Deputy Culture Minister for Legal and Parliamentary affairs (Moghadam, 2002). Also, three women were appointed as presidential advisors, 16 women as advisors to ministers, and 105 women as Directors General or Deputy Directors in two-thirds of the ministries (Mohammadi, 2007).

These women worked closely with the thirteen reform-minded women elected in 2000 to a reformist-dominated parliament (Moghadam, 2002). The women MPs of the Sixth Parliament formed a bloc, referred to as the Women's Faction, and unlike their predecessors, fearlessly declared their intentions to change the laws in favor of women (Barlaw & Akbarzadeh, 2008). The reform movement not only resulted in women's political participation in parliamentary elections, but in local council elections after 1999, in which one-third of the representatives were women, making for a total of 114 women in 109 cities (Bahramitash, 2007). These political achievements during the Reform Era were tightly associated with the unprecedented freedom women's rights activists gained for their activities. In the press and through their NGOs, they explicitly supported reformist women MPs, who in return become their clear voice in politics and who could lobby for their causes in decision-making bodies (Mohammadi, 2007).

The pro-NGO policies of the government for the establishment of a more vibrant civil society caused the burgeoning of non-government organizations, many of which were founded around women's issues (Esfandiari, 2010). From 1997 to 2005, the number of NGOs that concentrated on the problems of the women population, including those run by women's rights

activists, rose from 67 to 337 (Koolae, 2012). Moreover, Khatami was well aware that since the conservatives controlled the national broadcasting organization (IRIB), he would need the press to disseminate visions of his social and political reforms and gather greater support for his policies (Sameti, 2007). Therefore, the measures his Minister of Culture undertook to relax government control over the press, arts, and cinema, and to ease the issue of publishing permits, transformed the face of the press in Iran (Tazmini, 2009, p. 65).

In the first three years of the Khatami administration, the number of local and national newspapers, and weekly and monthly journals increased from a couple of hundred to several hundred (Tarock, 2001). This number of publications and their variety in terms of cultural, social, and political orientation was unprecedented in all of Iranian history, not just that of the Islamic Republic (Tarock, 2001). This was the situation that human rights activist and lawyer Mehrangiz Kar referred to as the 'Iranian Media Spring' (cited in Jahanshahrad, 2012). The number of women's press also grew in this environment. By 1999, in addition to numerous women's journals published locally, thirteen women's journals and newspapers were being published at the national level (Mahdi, 2004). The previously launched publications (*Neda*, *Payam-e Zan*, *Payam-e Haajar*, *Zane Rooz*, *Farzaneh*, *Nameh-ye Zan*, *Nesa*, *Shahed-e Baanovaaan*, *Al-Mahjoobeh*, *Al-Tahereh*, and *Zanan*), were joined by journals trying to approach gender issues from different angles, and to frame them in various discourses (Mir-Hosseini, 2002). *Zan* (Woman), the first-ever women's daily newspaper in Iran, launched in August 1998 by Faezeh Hashemi, a member of the Fifth Parliament and daughter of ex-president Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) (Mir-Hosseini, 2002). *Jense Dovom* (the second sex), known as the most secular and radical of the women's press in Iran, was launched in March 1998 by Noushin Ahmadi-Khorasani, a prominent women's rights activist, writer, and publisher in her late twenties (Khiabany, 2010, pp. 205-206). The journal's articles were marked by a leftist penchant and a noticeable absence of any discussion of religion (Mir-Hosseini, 2002). *Hoqooqe Zanaan* (Women's Right) appeared in July 1998 and concentrated mainly on violence against women (Farhanpour, 2012).

Although hardliner conservatives had been imposing control on the media sphere since the revolutionary period, their program to prevent the press from resonating independent voices within civil society manifested itself more conspicuously after reformists' triumph. Particularly after the decisive victory of the reformists in the 2000 parliamentary election, the conservative

faction responded to the ongoing openness of reformist press that called for the institutionalization of democracy and the establishment of free political parties with a wave of closures and censorship (Rahimi, 2003). During this crackdown, the conservative-dominated judiciary system held the main executive power. As mentioned earlier, by abusing the definition of political offence in the press law, the judiciary was able to ban many progressive publications and even prosecute some of their journalists and editors (Sameti 2007; Tarock, 2001). Since 2001, in line with the reformist press, women's publications like *Zan* and *Payame Hajar* were closed and others threatened. It will be explained in section 2.3 that it was the conservatives' crackdown on the women's press that saw the beginning of the use of the Internet by women's rights activists.

During the Reform Era, the collaborative efforts of women's legal establishments, parliamentarians, press, and women's rights' NGOs all pushed policy makers to lift some of the restrictions on women's legal rights (Vakil, 2011, p. 108). Thus, was the legal age of marriage for girls and boys successfully raised (Esfandiari, 2010); and the reform of the child custody law entitled women to have custody of their children - boys and girls alike - up to age seven¹⁷; and the ban on giving government scholarships for the study abroad of unaccompanied single women was lifted (Esfandiari, 2010). In spite of these legal victories, though, many other bills passed by MPs to advance women were rejected by the conservative Guardian Council, including ratification of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The achievements of women's rights activists during the 1990s, specifically the eight-year period of the reformist government, were not limited to legal victories. Mainly three prospects created by the new social and political scene in the country, and by the efforts of the activists, had a profound impact on women's rights discourse in Iran. First, despite traditionalist attempts to restrain women's awareness, the irreversible process of constructing women's social identity had begun, putting tremendous pressure on the Islamic state to adopt a more reconciliatory approach toward women (Kian, 1997; Mahdi, 2004). As the secular feminist Mehrangiz Kar described (cited in Halper, 2005, p. 119):

17 Previously, the law entitled the mother to have custody of boys only up to age two. Furthermore, with this new legislation, it is the court that decides if the mother or father should receive custody once children reach the age of seven (Koolae, 2012).

[Iranian women gained] confidence in themselves. With all the sacrifices they made, Iranian women know how much their current and future rulers owe them and that egalitarian rights are part of what is due to them. This demand is no longer that of a group of women; it is a nationwide one.

Second, in the 1990s the interconnectivity among women's NGOs, along with the relative freedom of press before 2001, which permitted the publication of divergent ideologies, caused unprecedented cooperation among secular and Islamist activists, who had previously been divided in the 1980s (Ahmadi, 2006; Halper, 2005; Kian, 1997). This solidarity also originated from a general desire for improving women's status in the family, workplace, schools, and in society at large – common interests that provided incentive for all to work more closely together (Halper, 2005). Islamic feminist journals like *Farzaneh* and *Zanan* started opening up new space for dialogue between Islamic and secular activists (Ahmadi, 2006), regularly publishing articles by prominent secular feminists like Mehrangiz Kar and Shirin Ibadi, a jurist who won the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize. Mahbubeh Umami, the editor of *Farzaneh*, described this trend (cited in Kian, 1997, p. 91):

Although secular women do not share our convictions, we can collaborate because we all work to promote women's status. We [Islamist women] no longer consider ourselves to be the sole heirs of the revolution. We have realized that our sectarian views of the first post-revolutionary years led to the isolation of many competent seculars, which was to the detriment of all women. We now hope to compensate our errors.

Finally, the international recognition of Iranian women's rights discourse drastically increased through the activists' cooperation with international NGOs, their participation in international seminars, and in publicizing their activities in the international media (Hoodfar, 1999). Moreover, the interactivity of Iranian activists with other countries' women's rights activists led to the former learning from the experience of the latter (Vakil, 2011, p. 127). With regards to this debate, it should not be ignored that the post 9-11 expansion of the idea of Islam and Islamic societies are essentially backward, anti-modern, and opposed to women's rights threatened the international credit that Iranian reformists and women's rights activists had painstakingly acquired with their active and visible social and political participation (Povey, 2012).

2.2.6 Women's rights activism and Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005-2013)

Ahmadinejad's program of restraining civil society escalated the control and monitoring of NGOs, social and political players, and reformist political elites (Morady, 2010). Women's rights activists were among the most suppressed groups during the two terms of Ahmadinejad's presidency. The growing presence of women in the public sphere had become a serious source of concern for fundamentalists and their selected president, Mahmud Ahmadinejad (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008). To decelerate this process, by the spring of 2006, Ahmadinejad had changed the name of the presidential office, the Bureau of Women's Participation, to the Center for Women and Family Affairs, suggesting a new focus on women's roles in the family over their public participation (Osanloo, 2008). He also appointed a new director for the center, Zohreh Tabibzadeh Nouri, who declared that Iran would not ratify CEDAW so long as she was in charge (Osanloo, 2008). Restrictions on commemorating International Women's Day (8 March), which had been relaxed during the reformist government, were reinstated in 2006, and some women's meetings in universities were canceled (Mir-Hosseini, 2006). A few months later, Ahmadinejad advised Iranian women to return to their homes and focus on their "primary" responsibility of raising children (Barlow & Akbarzadeh, 2008). Revealing a wide gap between the state and public opinion, his speech was greeted with shock and indignation among large segments of Iranian women (Barlow & Akbarzadeh, 2008). The government's attacks on the network of the women's rights movement became more severe following two endogenous and exogenous events: the emergence of Iranian activists' One Million Signature (OMS) Campaign and Washington's so-called 'democracy promotion program' in Iran.

On 27 August 2006, a women's NGO, *Markaze Farhangi Zanan* (Women's Cultural Center), composed of self-identified secular and younger generation of feminists, launched the One Million Signature Campaign, modeled after a similar effort in Morocco. The majority of Islamist activists, who were in favor of reconciliatory approaches, like lobbying politicians, were not key players in this campaign, resulting in some tension amongst the feminists of that time (Sameh, 2010). The campaign aimed at collecting one million signatures, through door-to-door contact, on a petition which demanded the revision of the discriminatory laws against women (Sameh, 2010). While the petition, and its submission to the Iranian parliament, was the ultimate goal, the initiative also aimed at training women on their individual and human rights, as well as developing profound gender consciousness (Jahanshahrad, 2012). The campaign organization

was leaderless, comprised instead of committees coordinating actions. After a year's effort, the OMS campaign spread to 16 provinces and succeeded in getting the support of students, workers, human rights activists, as well as that of reformist clerics (Vakil, 2011, p. 178).

Despite support from a number of well-known clerics and members of the parliament, President Ahmadinejad responded to the campaign with harsh measures (Rahimi & Gheytonchi, 2008). Being accused of challenging aspects of the Islamic constitution and spreading propaganda against the government, the campaign office was closed, its official website was blocked, some of its members fined and arrested, and the passports and computer files of others confiscated (Moghadam & Gheytonchi, 2010). After the formation of the OMS campaign, Ahmadinejad's repression of women's groups deteriorated, and the activists, particularly secular ones, were labeled as dissidents (Moghadam & Gheytonchi, 2010).

Also during this time, a foreign-sourced trouble for Tehran caused the women's rights movement to face yet more restrictions. As part of a plan to stimulate domestic changes in Iran, the US and its allies decided to spend billions on fake Iranian women's NGOs, as well as funding for broadcasting services (Povey, 2012). The Bush Administration's campaign of regime change in Iran, with a specific focus on women's rights advocates, enabled Iran's conservative government to frame women's rights activists as 'threats to national security' (Raunio, 2014). Therefore, women's rights activists and their NGOs were one of the first sectors to feel the hardliners' backlash to Bush program (Raunio, 2014). Elahe Koolaei, the reformist MP in the Sixth Parliament, described in her article (2012) that the conservative government after Khatami closed down many independent women's NGOs and replaced them with state-sponsored NGOs, claiming the former were supported by the USA.

Despite the clampdown, however, women's rights activists continued their efforts, especially after conservative members of Parliament tried to introduce a series of discriminatory bills. The most considerable effort was in response to the Ahmadinejad administration's pressure on the conservative parliament to add a number of articles to the Family Protection Act law. The most disputed proposal would enable men to have a second marriage without the consent of the first wife, which, hitherto, had been a legal requirement (Theodoulou, 2008). The suggested article raised great controversy and caused the formation of a coalition of both secular and Islamist activists that prevented ratification of the bill (Vakil, 2011, p. 187). A broad array of women's rights groups, including the Islamist *Zeinab* (a religious name) Society, and the

Women's Organization of the Islamic Revolution, and more secular ones like the group of activists who formed the One Million Signature Campaign, collaborated in mobilizing public opinion against the bill and meeting with members of parliament to voice their objection (Vakil, 2011, p. 187). Their efforts resulted in postponing ratification and sending the bill back to its legal committee for further investigation. The government, however, reinforced its intimidation of women's rights activists, mainly targeting women's press. *Zanan*, the most prominent feminist magazine, was thus banned in 2008.

In April 2009, a few months before the disputed presidential election, women formed a broad pre-election coalition called the *Convergence of Women* (Hamgarayee Zanan). Instead of endorsing a specific candidate, they presented their issues to all four nominees and demanded a response from each (Shojaei, 2012a). The coalition received the support of 40 women's rights groups, and 700 activists and well-known figures, turning it into the largest pre-election coalition of women in Iranian history (Shojaei, 2012a). While Karroubi and Mousavi, the reformist candidates, promised to submit bills to the parliament with the intent of reforming laws discriminating against women, Ahmadinejad's representative responded with an attack first on CEDAW, for being against Islam, and then on Shirin Ebadi, the Nobel Peace Laureate, accusing her of westernizing Iranian culture (Tahmasebi-Birgani, 2010).

By the evening of the election of 12 June 2009, Mahmud Ahmadinejad was declared the winner, a result contested by the other candidates, particularly Mousavi and Karroubi, who called for a recount. Starting the next day, clashes by the supporters of these candidates occurred in Tehran and other major cities. These demonstrations, and the harsh government crackdown that followed, continued over subsequent weeks and months received wide coverage in the international media. As far as women's rights activists were concerned, the post-election uprisings known as the Green Movement were a link between improvements in women's rights and the trend of political liberalization (Vakil, 2011, p. 202). One month after the election, women's rights activists published a statement with 800 signatures condemning the election results and the crackdowns on the protesters (Allahyari, 2011). The government escalated its suppression over women's groups and campaigns in response to their solidarity with protesters (Moruzzi, 2009).

The new political scene in the country and the increased suppression of civil society largely influenced Iranian women's right movement. A division was formed among activists who

believed it was time for strategies of confrontation, as reform was not possible within the structure of an illegitimate government and those who yet believed in negotiating with the state (Vakil, 2011, p. 203). Also, a shift in discourse: While activists' main focus remained on women's legal issues, they engaged more in human rights and democracy discourse after the protests (Shojaei, 2012b). The initiatives best exemplifying this shift was the foundation of the 'Green Solidarity of the Women's Movement' and the 'Committee for Solidarity Against Social Violence' a few months after the uprisings. Moreover, the movement lost a significant part of its resources due to the forced closure of many of its NGOs and groups, the attacks on its campaigns and coalitions, and the onslaught on individual activists, forcing many to go underground or flee into exile (Vakil, 2011, p. 202).

Due to this widespread suppression and loss of the activism's resources, in the second term of Ahmadinejad's administration the battle for the advancement of women's rights entered a period of inactivity. It was only with the coming of Rouhani's 2013 presidency that hope and energy was once more in effect for women's rights activists. On various occasions during his campaign and after the election, Rouhani emphasized the need to reduce government intervention in people's private lives, to increase transparency in addressing the country's problems, to eliminate discriminatory and gender-segregating policies, and to protect gender equality in rights and opportunities (Vakil, 2013). So far, Rouhani has visibly made certain improvements for Iranian women. He removed the Ahmadinejad-led segregation policies at universities; pushed for the elimination of discriminatory laws against women in gaining equal employment opportunities; and even discussed easing restrictions on veiling. Although he did not include women in his list of ministers, he did appoint two women to his cabinet, and also selected Iran's first female ambassador. Also, as Vice President for Women and Family Affairs, Rouhani appointed Shahindokht Mollaverdi, a jurist, scholar, and well-known women's rights activist. Although it is still too soon to define the extent of freedom for women's rights activism in this new political era, by the time of field research in 2014-2015, women's rights activists had resumed their conventions and began to meet more openly, compared to the years under Ahmadinejad's rule (Tahmasebi, cited in Jones, 2013). Several prominent women's rights activists have been invited by the government to express their views for improving women's status (Rezai-Rashti, 2015). Also, as a defining moment for women's rights movement, *Zanan*

magazine, after being banned for almost seven years, was relaunched under the new name of *Zanane Emrouz* (Today's Women).

2.3 Women's Rights Activism in the Internet age

The nature of Iran's women's rights movement has been shaped through interaction with the context under which it operates. In the semi-democratic political context of Iran (Fadaee, 2012), the movement has adopted more incremental and penetrative strategies, rather than confrontational tactics (e.g. mass protests), to achieve incremental but sustainable gains (Mahdi, 2004). Investigating Iran's contemporary social movements, Fadaee (2012) argues: "This context has led to a specific nature of state and civil society, in which social action is not directly hostile towards the state but it is an interaction and negotiation with the state. This is totally different from an authoritarian context (p. 134)." Since the 1979 Revolution, in order to advance the rights of their compatriot women, women's rights activist groups have created special purpose coalitions and campaigns which hardly operate on the basis of mass protests¹⁸. Rather, they concentrate on raising public awareness and support, and pressuring decision makers through public opinion, lobbying, and negotiations.

The uneven relationship between the post-revolutionary governments and the activists, which has emerged from a different approach of political factions toward civil society, has affected the dynamic of women's rights activism within the framework of its peaceful (i.e., non-confrontational) nature and strategies. The first decade after the 1979 Revolution imposed restrictions on secular activists, which paved the way for the growth of Muslim activist organizations and for the persuasion of women's rights mainly within the family, while the post-war era saw the emergence of a women's rights activism directing modern discourses and agendas in terms of women's social and political presence (Kian, 1997). This effort culminated in the Reform Era's unprecedented growth of women's press and NGOs able to actively pursue such a modern agenda. Also in this era, activists achieved notable legal victories by investing in their NGOs and press, and through cooperating with reformist female politicians in the

¹⁸ As a very rare case, a coalition of women's NGOs from Tehran and other cities and student activists held a demonstration in front of the University of Tehran on 12 June 2005 to call for eliminating the inequalities embedded in the Iranian legal system. This peaceful demonstration was mainly formed through the participation of women's rights and student activists.

government and parliament. All these efforts at raising awareness, however, were restricted by the conservative faction's crackdown on women's and reformists' press in Khatami's final years of presidency. Then during the Ahmadinejad administration, the clampdown by hardliner conservatives extended beyond the activism's publications to include closure of its very organizations and control of its interactions, as in the case of the OMS campaign.

It was in the early 2000s, with the closure of some women's and reformist publications and increased control on others, that the Internet came on the scene. "Follow in the long history of women's public writing" (Sreberny & Khiyabany, 2010, p. 107), a variety of women's websites and blogs emerged as the new medium for the communication of women's rights discourse. Also, according to available reports (Lerner, 2010; Michaelsen, 2011; Sreberny & Khiyabany, 2010; Tohidi, 2009), women's rights activists' use of the Internet as a means for internal interactions coincided with the suppression of the activist groups' meetings under the hardliner Ahmadinejad. Lerner (2010) reported during the 2006 One Million Signature Campaign, e-mail lists were established for communication between member activists. The utilization of e-mail technology was also witnessed during the 2009 pre-election coalition. E-mail groups were used to network different women's rights activist groups and individuals forming the coalition (Tohidi, 2009).

The first website devoted to women's issues was launched in 2002. *Zanane Iran*¹⁹ (Women of Iran) disseminated gender-related news and information and served as a key place for raising a number of significant women-related demands, such as the ratification of CEDAW (Sreberny & Khiyabany, 2010, pp. 109-110). The other prominent women's website of the time, *Teribune Feministie Iran*²⁰ (Iranian Feminist Tribune) was launched in 2003. The Web site was owned by the *Markaze Farhangi Zanan* (Women's Cultural Center), which in 2006 launched the One Million Signature Campaign. This NGO established a specific website for the OMS campaign, called 'Change for Equality'. The website published the campaigners' petitions, articles, news stories, interviews, and photos in different languages such as Persian, English, French, German, and Spanish (Sameh, 2010). Another activist website of the time was the well-known *Meydan Zanan*²¹ (Women's Field). It was chiefly an online initiative providing a platform for the introduction of women's campaigns, such as 'My Mother, My Country', which supported the

19 www.womeniniran.org (The website is no longer available).

20 www.iftribune.es

21 www.meydaan.com (The Web site is no longer available)

right to Iranian nationality for children of Iranian mothers and fathers of Iraqi or Afghan origin (Sreberny & Khiyabany, 2010, p. 108).

From 2002 to 2007, blogs became the dominant online sites for Iranian cultural and political production (Akhavan, 2010). Particularly, the Ahmadinejad crackdown on public spaces resulted in a burgeoning blogosphere with Iranians (Sreberny & Khiyabany, 2010, p. 116). In this period, a significant area of the Iranian blogosphere, known as *Weblogistan* (Land of the Blogs), was related to women's issues (Akhavan, 2011; Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008; Shirazi, 2012). To a large extent, *Weblogistan* developed through the active participation of many female bloggers including professional journalists, women's rights activists, professionals such as lawyers, engineers, and doctors, as well as ordinary women (Shirazi, 2012). In addition to many individual blogs, inspired by collective efforts in running women's magazines and websites, the activists also formed collective blogs like herlandmag.com/weblog (Sreberny & Khiyabany, 2010, p. 110).

Ever since Iranians started exploring the sociopolitical implications of the Internet, development of this new communication technology has been subject to the same challenge that faced the print media: that is, the government's fluctuation between a pragmatic and ideological media policy, as Khiabany (2010, pp. 151-52) described. Although the entire political spectrum advocated vast investments in digital communication technologies to fulfill the development and modernization requirements of the country, politicization of the Internet entailed factional frictions and tensions within the state as well as between the state and the people (Sohrabi-Haghighat, 2011; Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010, p. 25). While politicians advocated the civil society shared a view of the Internet as inherently decentralizing, democratic, and progressive, conservatives were quick to limit and control the political potential of the Internet for their opposition while simultaneously utilizing it for their own benefit (Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010, p. 25). In 2002, a special committee for the "Legal Investigation of Internet-Related Crimes and Offenses" was formed by the judiciary. A year later, aside from pornography websites, dozens of other sites with political content, including those of American radio and TV stations broadcasting in Persian, were banned (Rahimi, 2003). Also, responding to the online shift of the reformist press, different conservative groups launched their own competing websites to publish news and political commentary against their opponents (Michaelsen, 2011). Thus, the breadth of the highly factionalized political landscape of the country found its way to the Internet (Michaelsen, 2011).

With regards to women's online media, in 2005, a few months after Ahmadinejad's first election, the *Teribune Feministie Iran* (Iranian Feminist Tribune) was blocked. In response, the *Markaze Farhangi Zanan* (Women's Cultural Center) launched a second website named *Zanestan*²² (Land of Women), which was the first electronic magazine on women's rights. This Web site was as well blocked after two years. Also, as politicization of blogging increased, the government filtering program was extended to the blogosphere, which was hardly controlled by the authorities prior to 2005 (Sreberny & Khiyabany, 2010, p. 70).

The conservative bodies' crackdown on the Internet became more severe following the 2009 protests that greeted Ahmadinejad's second term election and the ubiquitous role that social media found in its coverage of the conflict (Baldino & Goold, 2014). To confront what they called a 'Soft War', the authorities dramatically reduced download speed in order to restrict the flow of information, photos, and video clips, and blocked access to all major social networking sites, as well as hundreds of websites affiliated with the protesters and reformist candidates (Freedom House, 2012; Rahimi, 2011). Iranians have been widely using circumvention tools like Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and proxies ever since as the most popular solutions to bypassing the Internet filtering (Freedom House, 2012).

Since 2009, Iran's Internet governance system has become far more multifaceted (Ricchiardi, 2014)²³. Unclear division of power within this system and the existence of so many contradictory viewpoints have resulted in conflicts amongst the Iranian officials over Internet regulations, particularly since President Rouhani came into power. In the run-up to his election,

22 Herlandmag.com. currently is available at www.zanestan.es

23 After post-election protests different bodies were established by the state for the control of cyberspace. The Committee Charged with Determining Criminal Web Content was founded in 2009 under the supervision of the judiciary system to identify criminal web content to be filtered and blocked. Later in 2012, the Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC), the highest policy-making body for cyberspace was formed by the Supreme Leader. The SCC is composed of the country's President, as Council's Chairman, the Minister of Information and Communications Technology, the Minister of Culture, the parliament speaker, the head of the judiciary, the director of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), the commander of the Revolutionary Guard, the national police chief, and seven representatives of the Supreme Leader. In addition to these bodies, FATA, Iran's Cyber Police, was established in 2011 as a division of the Iranian police force to confront cyber crimes.

Rouhani made a bold promise that if he won, he would push for greater Internet freedom (Ricchiardi, 2014). While the hardliner conservatives were propagating against social media as a threat to national security, after his election, Rouhani described social media as a welcome phenomenon and one which had an undeniable role in his victory (Naeli, 2013). He even launched his own official Twitter page²⁴. Since his election, Rouhani's interventions²⁵ have tangibly affected the country's filtering policy (Bowen, 2015). In the most recent move toward greater Internet access, the government awarded 4G and 4.5G licenses to three Iranian mobile broadband companies; and allowed ISPs to offer wider bandwidth on home connections. In response to the conservative clerics who opposed the service, saying that it allows obscene images to be shared freely and more easily, Rouhani urged the clerics to be more tolerant of new technologies, saying: "We cannot close the gates of the world to our younger generation" (Iran Internet, 2014).

In the present era, women's rights activist groups maintain a significant online presence through prominent websites such as *Madreseye Feministi*²⁶ (The Feminist School), *Kanune Zanane Irani*²⁷ (Iranian Women Association), *Bidarzani*²⁸ (Bidarzani), and *Khaneh Amn*²⁹ (Safe Home). With the growth of social media users, these websites are also linked to their affiliated pages in social networking sites. The high presence of Rouhani's cabinet members and even some prominent conservative figures on Facebook and Twitter has not yet resulted in the removal of filtering on these sites. Yet in spite of these remaining limitations, social networking sites are avidly embraced by a broad spectrum of Iranian society from the youth to elders, and from the general population³⁰ to the political and religious elites (Iran Media Program, 2015).

24 @HassanRouhani

25 When the Committee Charged with Determining Offensive Content ordered WhatsApp to be blocked in 2014, Rouhani advised his ICT Minister to refuse to implement it. As the committee's hardliner secretary claimed that Rouhani had no basis for challenging the committee's directives, the minister pointed out that as chairman of the SCC, Rouhani's say on the matter was final, and the block on WhatsApp would not be implemented.

26 www.feministschool.com

27 www.ir-women.com

28 www.bidarzani.com

29 www.khanehamn.org

30 In December 2017, there were 40 million Facebook subscribers in Iran (Internet World Stats, 2017).

Women's rights activists took to social media during two major campaigns they ran during the Rouhani administration. The first was formed in 2013 in protest to an amendment to the Children's Protection Law. The second was launched in October 2015 to push for a greater presence of female parliamentarians in the 2016 parliamentary election.

2.4 Conclusion

It must by now be evident that the dynamic of women's rights activism has been significantly influenced by the political environment under which it operates. Before the expansion of the Internet among Iranian society, women's rights activists extensively benefited from the growth of their NGOs and the press under the Rafsanjani and Khatami administrations. It was right at the peak of their growth and legal victories that they found themselves one of key targets of the conservatives' program to control and repress the civil society. What we know so far from extant reports is that the activists began to use the Internet upon the forced closure of the women's press and the repression of their organizations. However, yet, there is no in-depth empirical knowledge of the role and impacts that the Internet has had for women's rights activism. Accordingly, the next chapter will set out the direction for the empirical investigation of such research.

CHAPTER 3

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The core objective of this thesis is to explore the impacts of online communication on Iranian women's rights activism. This objective places the research within the context of scholarly debates on information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly the Internet, for activism. The first part of this chapter provides an extensive reading of theories and studies in this field, highlighting the significance of communication technologies and the Internet for activism from the perspective of social movements, public relations, and communication theorists, while also embedding empirical studies and review articles on the promises and perils of Internet-mediated communication for activism. Armed with both this and Chapter 2's study, those specific areas that should be attended to in the current examination of women's rights activists' Internet-mediated communication are defined in the second part of this chapter. It is these areas specifying the three research questions directing the examinations of this study.

3.1 Communication Technologies and the Internet for Activism

Theories and empirical studies around activism and social movements concentrate on the role of ICTs in general, and Internet technologies in particular, on two broad fields of activists' practices: (a) activists' relation with the public, and (b) activists' internal relations. As Van De Donk, Loader, Nixon, and Rucht (2004, p. 3) explained, the centrality of external and internal interactions for activist groups points to the importance of communication, and considering the network structure of social movements and their limited resources, to the attractiveness of utilizing ICTs. The role of ICTs in the first field is rooted in a broader debate, mainly by social movements, public relations, and communication scholars, about activists' public communication through alternative media and presentation on mainstream media. The sections that follow present these debates. The third section, meanwhile, concentrates on the second field: the Internet for activists' internal relations. This field contains studies that are concerned with the impacts of the Internet on communication and organization within activist groups and social movement networks, as well as the participation of individual activists. Activists' internal interactions have been historically under the focus of social movement scholars. But since the advent of ICTs and the Internet, communication scholars have also been investigating this field.

Before explaining theoretical discussions about these two fields, it is important to note a number of points about theoretical and empirical literatures in this chapter. As mentioned in the introduction chapter, this study focuses on women's rights activists and activist groups' independent activities as much as it concentrates on the networks of cooperation among those actors forming the women's rights movement. However, the theories that inform this research's conceptual framework are mainly focused on activism within the context of social movements, since activists and activist groups' activities, independent of the network of social movements, are under-theorized social phenomenon.

With regards to empirical studies, addressing the thesis definition of activist presented in Chapter One, and considering the characteristics of the case of the study, the current review focusses mainly on the literature examining Internet communication for activism cases affiliated with on-the-ground activities and groups, rather than literature on online activism cases having no offline presence. Moreover, the greatest part of the empirically-based studies presented in this chapter are about activists' experiences of the Internet within the context of Western countries, since, with few exceptions, most studies on activism and the Internet in transitional and undemocratic countries are anecdotal. The increasing amount of literature on the political Internet in Arab countries has provided valuable empirical evidence on the democratic role of the Internet in the Middle East. Much of these studies, however, are focused on public participation and mass mobilization through the Internet, likely to the studies on Iran's 2009 Green Movement. These studies have largely failed to shed light on the impacts of the Internet on activists and activist groups.

3.1.1 Activists' public communication through online alternative media

According to public relation scholars Smith and Ferguson (2010), activists utilize various communication means to engage with the public for two main purposes. First, they should convince society about the legitimacy of their issues and position, while simultaneously undermining the legitimacy of their targets (an organization, a public policy, and/or a social norm). Second, in order to maintain their organizations and make their targets recognize their influence, activist groups need to manage relationships with supporters. New social movement theorists have discussed the importance of media and communication, while theorizing social movements. Melucci (1996) stated that collective identity in social movements requires the continuous act of recognizing and being recognized through an exchange of information between

social movements actors and the environment in which they operate (cited in Mattoni & Trere, 2014). Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993), meanwhile, positioned media as central to their study of social movements, identifying three reasons why a social movement needs media, reasons bearing striking resemblance to the goals specified by Smith and Ferguson (2010): (a) to convey its message to its constituency and mobilize their support, (b) to validate that the movement is an important actor by receiving the recognition of its targets, and (c) To enlarge the scope of conflict to a broader public to improve its relative power versus that of its target.

Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993, p. 116) also emphasized the greater power of mainstream media when it comes to movements' media transactions: "Movements are much more dependent on media than the reverse, and this fundamental asymmetry implies the greater power of the media system in the transaction." Rucht (2004) asserted that this asymmetric relationship "stems from the fact that most movements need the media, but the media seldom need the movements" (p. 30). Communication scholars have also discussed that receiving mainstream media coverage is not a straightforward process for activists, because they are located outside the realm of institutional politics, and professional standards of media selection, as well, due to rigid competition for attention from a variety of causes and activist groups (Pfetsch & Adam, 2011). Under such circumstances, activists and social movements develop their own media, often denoted as 'social movement media' (Downing, 2008, 2010) and 'alternative media' (Atton, 2002). These terms share the common assumption that by creating media of their own, activists gain independence in their communication activities and challenge the hegemony of mainstream media and political actors that result, in terms of public opinion, in their marginalization or, at worst, the elimination of activists and their issues (Atton, 2010).

"The Internet represents a new era for alternative media" (Ford & Gill, 2001, p. 202). Since the early 1990s, scholars' attention to activists' alternative media has shifted from offline channels like leaflets, newsletters, and videos (Chiumbu, 2015) to the Internet due to its fast adoption by activist groups and social movements. Coombs (1998) discussed that while activists have limited control over how news media disseminate their issues, the Internet offers them a direct and controllable communication channel. Early research into social movements' alternative media mainly in the form of websites and e-mail distribution lists (e.g. Bennet, 2003; Denning, 2001; Myers, 2000) reported the ability the Internet offered activists in bypassing mass media filters and gaining a considerable level of information and communication independence.

More theoretical and empirical studies have since emerged around the Internet providing activists with public communication opportunities not possible through mainstream media and older forms of alternative media. Drawing on literature on Internet for activism, Breindl (2010) explained that the elimination of intermediaries in online spaces gives activist groups and individuals unlimited editorial control on explaining, informing, and developing their own narratives. He also discussed that this process contributes to disrupting elite dominance in the field of information production and control. Distraction of elite control was also stressed by Micó and Ripollés (2014), who asserted that social media facilitated a transition from a situation in which news was constructed through an interaction of elites to a more open and competitive situation. They supported this assertion by evidence from the recent 15-M movement in Spain.

Scholars have discussed that activists' control over their own online media provides them with the opportunity to self-present themselves. Cammaerts (2012) discussed movements' self-mediation on the Internet includes self-presentation of their protests and activities to counter the negative bias of mainstream media reporting their actions. Analyses by Porta and Mosca (2009) on 261 websites of global justice movement (GJM) organizations in European countries demonstrated that activists' websites and blogs serve as opportunities for self-presentation to the general public in a way considered by activists as 'electronic business cards' reflecting and representing their identity and past history. The GJM organizations that were studied increased their transparency by publishing information about their history and identity. Also, researching the self-presentation of European Women's Lobby (EWL) activists on the Web, Pudrovska and Ferree (2004) illustrated that the thirteen involved women's NGOs diffused their strategies and identities through web-based communication in order to increase their organizational visibility. In his literature review article, Garrett (2006) discussed that online information distribution by activists' media increases the public visibility not only of the activists themselves, but also their target officials. He described this situation as the reverse of the Foucauldian Panopticon, wherein ICTs allow civil society to observe and quickly report the power elites' inappropriate actions outside the traditional media spotlight.

Besides the issue of control and independence, several empirical studies praised activists' online media for compressing the space and time barriers of information dissemination, enabling them to reach out to millions of people at once. In his analysis of Internet Activism within the global context, Ayres (1999) expressed that "when a message is posted on a website, it is

immediately accessible, crossing time and geographic boundaries without a concern for time zones, media coverage, or customs barriers” (p. 138). Studies on the early adoption of the Internet in the 1990s by Zapatista, the Battle of Seattle, and Anti MAI movements strongly underlined the potential of the Internet for the dissemination of information much faster and to a greater audience (e.g. Cleaver, 1998; Deibert, 2000; Froehling, 1997). Studying the communication strategies of localized transnational activists, Cammaerts (2006) posited that “alternative information needs alternative channels of distribution and the Internet provides activists with a user-friendly medium for the unbiased and especially the (cost-) efficient distribution of alternative information across the boundaries of time and space” (p. 6). Harlow and Harp’s (2012) comparative analysis of activists in the USA and Latin America illustrated that for activists in both regions, “what made online activism important was the Internet’s ability to cross distances and time barriers to create communities and mobilize people for offline activism” (p. 208).

In addition to compressing time and space barriers, the low cost adds to potential enthusiasm for online communication for activists. According to Coombs (1998), the Internet provides a low-cost communication channel for activist groups generally operating on limited financial resources. This potential has been emphasized by more recent studies on social media. Comparing three Mexican movements, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia (2014) showed that web 2.0 technology provides a lower cost and higher performance information dissemination tools for activists compared to web 1.0. Kim, Chun, Kwak, and Nam (2014) described that initiating and managing a social networking profile requires American environmental NGOs to possess less expertise and financial resources because these sites provide free accounts and include, by default, some information sharing and commentary features. To sum up, “social media are cost-effective tools that enable advocacy organizations to do more for less” (p. 14) - declared by Obar, Zube, and Lampe (2012), following their study of activists in U.S.-based advocacy groups.

For scholars who based their analyses on the social movement paradigm, the above-mentioned opportunities, provided by online alternative media, can consequently enhance the opportunity structure empowering or restricting a social movement. Social movement thinkers frequently describe this structure as ‘political opportunity structure’, stressing “the opening and closing of political space and its institutional substantive location” (Gamson & Meyer, 1996, p.

277) facilitating or repressing activists' collective action (Tarrow, 2011, p. 27). However, some social movement theorists have stressed that this structure also includes dimensions of the social and cultural environment, such as public consciousness and issue cultures (Gamson & Meyer, 1996). Scholars have suggested that by improving social movements' communication with their environment, ICTs can enhance their opportunity structure (Van De Donk et al., 2004, p. 9): ICTs enable activists to spread societal awareness of their issues by circumventing state regulation and mass media filters; to inform broader public, more quickly, about their ideas and tactics; and to mobilize and organize larger public support (Cammaerts, 2006, 2012; Garrett, 2006; Scott & Street, 2000; Van De Donk et al., 2004).

Less independence on mainstream media as a result of online media usage has been also discussed by a few number of scholars from the perspective of the movements' framing process: "strategic attempts to craft, disseminate and contest the language and narratives used to describe a movement" (Garrett, 2006, p. 204). This concept of framing as used in the study of social movements and collective actions is a set of "beliefs and meanings" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614) intending "to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists" (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 198). It has been discussed that online media has undermined the mainstream media power in framing a movement's messages by creating new networks over which activists can reframe/challenge extant frames in public opinion and communicate new frames towards their issues and activities (Breindle, 2010; Cammaerts, 2012; Garrett, 2006).

While many studies have introduced the Internet as a potentially useful tool for activists to reach out to their people, for one strand of scholars the contributions of online communication is paradoxical. Two main arguments are notable. First, that the lower cost and lower barriers of information distribution on the Internet can undermine the value of activists' information. Ayres discussed "while there is little question of the internet's ability to quickly disseminate information, there is a great deal of uncertainty about the value of this information. That is, much of the material available on the internet is often unreliable and clearly unverifiable" (1999, p. 141). The absence of gatekeepers while avoiding the distortion of mass media filters makes it more difficult to differentiate accurate information from fabrication, as Garrett (2006) highlighted. Breindle (2010) argued that in such a condition "actors who can best manage a fragmented informational environment will likely emerge as political counter-forces" (p.55).

Lebert (2003) emphasized that this new informational environment not only requires activists to develop more skills and strategies to protect themselves from less credible information, but also calls for people to be savvier in their media literacy so that the accuracy of online information can be properly assessed.

Second, for critics, the public use of the Internet, and consequently activists' access to their target public in the online realm, is being restricted, mainly due to Internet control and censorship, the digital divide, and digital literacy. While acknowledging the Internet's ability to bypass state control over mainstream media, Garrett (2006) warned about government control and manipulation by, for instance, blocking access to some pages or providing a mechanism for screening information traveling to and from the Internet. Focusing on activism in authoritarian states, Rød and Weidmann (2015) explained that similar to traditional media, the Internet is not free from government interference, since the advent of sophisticated tracking and filtering technologies enables governments to block unwanted online opposition activity and to use the Internet in their favor. Deibert and Rohozinski's (2008) study of global civil society warned that Internet censorship is growing in sophistication, scope, and scale, and though it began in a small handful of oppressive regimes, it has since expanded to include transitional and democratic countries. Lebert (2003) reported state surveillance on the Internet is a central concern for activists in many countries spreading human-rights related information. Also, it has been reported by studies in the case of Iran that Iranian activists not only faced with Internet filtering policies, they are more easily and quickly tracked down by the state when they communicate through social media (e.g. Baldino & Goold, 2014; Michaelsen, 2011; Morozov, 2011).

Pointing to the challenge of the digital divide and digital literacy, Coombs (1998) raised the point that the Internet cannot be effectively implicated for communication with every target public: "The Internet is useless if the target stakeholders cannot or do not use it" (p. 300). Breindl (2010) argued that due to Internet usage and knowledge inequalities, online political activities are rarely representative of the various social segments: "This is an important challenge to the principle of equality, central to all democracy models" (p. 55). Examining the distinguishing characteristics of activism in the United States and Latin America, Harlow and Harp (2012) showed that while for US activists online spaces serve as the main public communication channel, activists in Latin America could not rely on the Internet as their primarily communication tool since they were aware of the reality of the digital divide in their

societies. Surman and Reilly (2003) explained the interconnection between the digital literacy gap and the difficulty African civil society organizations have in moving on to more strategic uses of web technologies.

While activists' online media has most often been used as one-way, top-down message dissemination tool (Taylor & Sen Das, 2010), public relations scholars have discussed that this new media creates a unique space for engaging activists and their audiences in two-way communication. Kent and Taylor (1998) argued that strategically designed websites have the potential to foster relationship building by engaging activist organizations in dialogic communication with their visitors. They offered a theory-based strategic framework consisting of five strategies that practitioners can follow to develop dialogic relationship through web communication. Later, Taylor, Kent, and White (2001) asserted that dialogic communication can construct "effective and mutually rewarding interpersonal communication" (p. 267). To examine this potential in practice, they conducted more a detailed empirical study on 100 environmental activist organizations. The results revealed that the technical and design aspects that organizations implemented in order to build dialogic relationship on their websites did not result in a full and successful engagement in two-way communication with their publics. Sommerfeldt, Kent, and Taylor (2012) gained the same result. Through interviews with activist practitioners, they illustrated that the interactive features of activist websites do not translate into dialogic engagement with their visitors mainly due to the challenge that websites are pull mediums and their relationship building power depends on the currency of issues, as well as promotion by traditional public relation practices. The authors also argued that activist organizations cannot build bi-directional relations with their online audiences if they "do not view their websites as a dialogic tool" and do not "consciously invest time and resources into building online relationships" (p. 311).

While early public relations scholars focused on activist websites, recent ones have extended the line of inquiry into social networking sites. They discussed that the inherent interactive features of these sites, such as message posting and commentary features, provide the ideal condition for dialogic communication (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Kim et al., 2014). However, it has been illustrated by the bulk of empirical studies that advocacy and non-profit organizations are not fully and successfully taking advantage of the dialogic potential of social media, similar to their websites (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Bürger, 2015; Kim et al., 2014; Waters & Jamal,

2011). Waters and Jamal's (2011) study on public communication of non-profit organizations on Twitter concluded that such failure was related to the advocacy groups' trend in operating on social media to simply broadcast information rather than build relationships. Kim and his colleagues (2014) related this failure also to resource constraints. Drawing on the analysis of 60 US-based environmental organizations, they argued that although the mere creation of social media is cost-free, the maintenance of the profiles requires a regular allocation of human and financial resources. Bortree and Seltzer (2009) highlighted the same challenge, noting that while advocacy organizations assume that the mere creation of an interactive social networking profile is sufficient for dialogic communication, it is crucial to designate someone to respond to users' comments and to post timely and relevant information.

This section has thus presented discussions on activists' communication with their public independent of mainstream media. Social movements and communication scholars who have studied activists' media activities, aside from theorizing on activist alternative media, have paid great attention to efforts to push issues into the traditional mass media agenda. The next section provides scholarly debates on the consequences of the Internet for activists' media presentation.

3.1.2 The Internet and activists' presentation on mainstream media

Several studies have highlighted the fact that although activists are enabled by the Internet to inform their public independently, they still compete to push their issues into conventional media agenda in order to reach a broader populace (Cammaerts, 2006; Casero-Ripollés & Feenstra, 2012; Micó & Ripollés, 2014; Rucht, 2004). For activists, traditional mass media remain crucial "as pre-selectors of credible information and as 'serious' political commentators" (Rucht, 2004, p. 26). Activists are also aware of the reality of the digital divide preventing their voices from reaching disadvantaged groups of society through the Internet (Cammaerts, 2006). They struggle to get media attention "which in turn may be crucial to influencing people's hearts and minds and, eventually, policy decisions" (Rucht, 2004, p. 25). Therefore, as Pfetsch and Adam (2011) asserted, the media agenda "reflects the effort of different political actors and pressure groups to become visible in public" (p. 4).

Scholars' emphasis on the influence of mainstream media on public opinion toward activists' issues is a reflection of the basic assertion of agenda-setting theory: mass media coverage of an issue is a key step in the formation of public opinion (McCombs, 2005). Or as McCombs and Ghanem (2001) explained: "The core theoretical assertion is that the degree of

emphasis placed on issues in the mass media influences the priority accorded these issues by the public” (p. 67). With the advent of the Internet, more recent agenda-setting thinkers have added online media to the traditional agenda-setting theory. Reviewing the evolution of the theory, McCombs (2005) noted “now the Internet is the new frontier for research on these traditional agenda-setting effects” (p. 544). He explained that online communication channels challenge the agenda-setting role of journalists and offer the public a more diversified agenda compared to the time when the public received redundant information from mainstream news media. Pfetsch, Miltner, and Maier (2016) argued that through the Internet, challengers can avoid the gatekeeping functions of traditional media and gain direct access to the public sphere. As such, “they may contribute more effectively to setting the public’s and the political issue agendas” (p. 54).

Scholars have not only discussed the Internet as having a direct effect on the public agenda, but also paid attention to its agenda-building potential: influencing the mainstream media agenda. For theorists who were concerned with the sources of media agenda, the question was “If the press [mainstream media] sets the public agenda, who sets the media agenda?” (McCombs, 2005, p. 548). One answer has been “the influence that the news agendas of different news organizations have on each other” (Robert & McCombs, 1994, p. 249), which is known as inter-media agenda-setting. It refers to the transmission of both object salience (first-level agenda-building) and attribute salience (second-level agenda-building) from one media to another. The inter-media agenda-setting model was extended by incorporating online media in the mix of agenda-builder media (Song, 2007).

A key argument about activists’ ability to influence mainstream media agenda is around the inter-media agenda-setting effects of their online media. Pfetsch and Adam (2011) concentrated on the nature of online-offline inter-media agenda-setting from the perspective of the “interplay and dynamics” (p. 7) between these two communication realms. From this perspective, they explained two types of online-offline spillover of challengers’ issues and frames. The first, direct spillovers “occur when messages from the discourse of challenger networks are selected by journalists of traditional media” (p. 7). The second type occurs when, through involvement with challengers’ online issue networks, online outlets of traditional media or particular online news media resonate challengers’ issues and frames. This type will be called double spillover “if these issues and frames are then taken up by the offline editions” (p.7). The authors discussed that the

spillover of challengers' issues from online networks into traditional media is context-sensitive. They proposed a combined theoretical framework and methodology to examine how 'specific types of online networks', 'different media outlets', 'country characteristics', and 'issue characteristics' affect spillover processes (p. 10). By the first two factors, they referred to the nature of online and offline communication as the supply and receiving sides, whereas by the latter they considered the impact of macro level factors indirectly affecting online-offline dynamics. As Pfetsch and Adam (2011) highlighted, while speaking of country characteristics, online-offline spillover is influenced by countries' political and media systems. The extant empirical studies, however, have tended to examine this process mostly within the context of democratic media systems. They have largely failed to specify whether and how spillover occurs under a political structure such as that of Iran, which imposes a strong control on the media system and social actors' media activities.

Lester and Hutchins' (2009) studied Australian environmental activists' efforts to push their issues into mass media agenda. Their research showed that 'direct spillover' (Pfetsch & Adam, 2011) successfully occurred in their case: the activist websites and SNSs became a primary source of information for mainstream media journalists. They highlighted that "the internet has become another device in the strategic toolbox of the environmental movement for gaining mainstream news media access" (p. 581). Similarly, Casero-Ripollés and Feenstra (2012) and Micó and Ripollés (2014) showed that news that activists produced on social media during Spanish 15M movement broke into mainstream media agenda and informed journalists' coverage of the movement.

In addition to the online-offline transition of issues and attributes, a few studies have argued that activists' online media can affect media coverage by providing content, such as press releases, policy papers, members' biographies, and e-mail addresses in order to foster relationships with journalists (e.g. Reber & Kim, 2006). It is discussed that such self-presentation not only provides mass media journalists with information informing their coverage, but also familiarizes them with new groups and experts who can bring an update on their cases (Jha, 2007; Jha, 2008; Lester & Hutchins, 2009). Two empirical studies by Jha (2007, 2008), however, showed that such potential is not fully explored by journalists in the traditional media. Her studies on the anti-WTO and anti-globalization protests in the USA provided no evidence to suggest that activists' online sites have changed journalists' source of contacts, as journalists

give preference to traditional sources, who are mainly the movements' spokespersons. These empirical studies uncovered that the priority journalists gave to spokespersons - also their reluctance to retrieve relevant information from activist websites - was related to their skepticism over the credibility of the accounts that protest organizers published online.

3.1.3 The Internet for activists' internal relations

In addition to studying activists' relationship with their public in the age of communication technologies, scholars have paid significant attention to the deployment of ICTs in particular, the Internet, for activists' internal relations. With regards to activists' relations at the movement level, it has been discussed by social movement thinkers that the decentralized and participatory system of ICTs conforms to the non-hierarchical and informal network structure of new social movements (Juris, 2005; Melucci, 1996; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002). Therefore, contemporary movements have been both supported and raised by activists' efforts to embrace Internet technologies into their everyday communication practices (Juris, 2005). At the level of activist groups and individuals, Bennet (2003) discussed many activist organizations within contemporary movements reflecting a similar decentralized, distributed model, allowing the Internet to become an organizational resource to shape their internal communication networks. Based on his definition of social movement, quoted earlier in Chapter One, Diani (2000) asserted the behavior of activist groups and individuals, the relations linking them to each other, and the 'feeling of mutual identification' bonding various groups and individuals within a movement, are among aspects of movements' networks expected to be shaped by computer-mediated communication.

The debate around the Internet and activists' internal relations is mainly formed by empirical and theoretical analyses on three specific areas presented in this section. First, scholars have attempted to show how communication inside activists' networks is affected by their Internet use. A central argument is that online technologies fill communication gaps between face-to-face meetings and can overcome limitations of space and time for activists' interactions (Wellman, 2001). Through the Internet, activists have found access to the ideas, experiences, and support of other activists with whom they might never have had contact (Myers, 2000). Exploring the potential of the Internet for social justice, activists who participated in the Seattle WTO protest, Eagleton-pierce (2001) discussed that the Internet facilitates the participation of marginalized actors and groups in decision-making and other collective processes. How online technologies

facilitate the maintenance of geographically dispersed networks has been the main focus of empirical studies on transnational activism cases. For instance, researchers showed that the Internet, especially e-mail lists, was critical for communicating information swiftly among Anti MAI activists (Ayres, 1999; Clark & Themudo, 2006; Deibert, 2000) and members of anti-globalization movements (Bennet, 2003; Juris, 2005) spread across several countries.

The above-mentioned studies also showed that the Internet enabled large numbers of activist groups within transnational movements to establish cost-efficient communication channels. For instance, Clark and Themudo (2006) studied a widely noted case of the Internet's role in the anti-globalization movement through concentrating on 'dotcause' organizations, which are mobilized primarily, but not exclusively, through the Internet. They revealed that by reducing the costs of information and resource sharing, online communication channels between these organizations lowered the transaction cost of forming coalitions. An early study by Bonchek (1997) revealed that ICTs reduced communication, coordination, and information costs of transnational, national, and local interest groups and social movements. On the other hand, the empirical findings by Nielsen (2009) posited that those same qualities that make online communication cheaper and easier can also generate new costs, thereby increasing the transaction cost of activism. His study on activists involved in the 2008 U.S. Democratic presidential primaries identified three interrelated problems associated with reduced up-front costs of communications, more communicators, and more forms of communication: redundant communication (over-communication), discrepant information (miscommunication), and more communication than individual activists and their groups can deal with (communication overload).

The second line of investigation into activists' internal relations seeks to explain how the organization of activist groups and the network which could connect different activist groups and individuals are influenced by these groups' and movements' use of the Internet for internal communication. With regards to activist groups, a salient argument is that the Internet facilitates the adoption of decentralized and non-hierarchical groups. Bennet's (2003) observation of transnational activism cases aimed at trade organization illustrated that utilization of the Internet may affect the internal development of activist organizations. He raised the issue that the distributed structure of the Internet can push contemporary activists to organize in remarkably non-hierarchical, broadly distributed, and flexible networks. Surman and Reilly (2003) maintained that while in traditional organizing techniques, information distribution required a

rigid, somewhat hierarchical approach, mailing lists and peer-to-peer technologies flatten this relationship. They, however, emphasized the potential of new tensions within activist organizations as the result of the fluid, instant possibility of online information distribution, which increasingly hands out the power of publishing to members at lower levels within the organizational hierarchy. A similar argument was raised by Clark and Themudo (2006), who provided empirical evidence from some organizations within the anti-globalization movement that suggested that by giving voice to traditionally excluded actors, online communication can upset the existing balance and trigger conflicts and a tendency to split.

As for the organization of a network linking different movement actors, scholars have presented the idea that the Internet creates a more flexible and collaborative network over which activist groups and individuals can mobilize and form collective actions. Surman and Reilly (2003) maintained that online technologies have both driven and benefited from the increased enthusiasm of civil society organizations about collaboration. They discussed that the celebrated feature of the Internet is its ability to serve as a cheap and fluid platform where civil organizations can easily work together. Bennet (2003) showed that the Internet not only affected the internal development of member organizations in global protests against trade unions, it also influenced the organization of networks connecting these organizations. His study illustrated that by increasing inter-organizational contacts, the Internet enabled the formation of larger coalition networks. While there have been little scholarly reports about the social media usefulness for the interactivity of activist groups, there are several empirical studies about the contribution of e-mail lists and websites to the formation of more collaborative network of activist groups (e.g. Eagleton-pierce, 2001; Simi & Futrell, 2006; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2004). Eagleton-pierce (2001) explained how websites and e-mail lists, which were established by NGOs involved in the Seattle WTO protests, facilitated the formation of coalitions. The websites connected information, places, and organizations, while e-mail lists facilitated many-to-many interactions and discussions. Van Aelst and Walgrave (2004) analyzed the websites of 17 anti-neoliberal organizations. They showed that these websites created a network for these organizations to maintain a high degree of collaboration. Analyzing the web presence of white power movement activists, Simi and Futrell (2006) suggested that websites are developed by activists and organizations to provide access to other groups' members and cultural items, such as music and literature, and as a coordinating platform for on-the-ground activities.

The well-cited conceptual framework about the organizational dynamic of action networks and online technologies was developed by Bennett and Segerberg (2012). They identified three types of action networks that exist in the contemporary era. At one extreme of the typology, they placed ‘collective action networks’, characterized by strong organizational coordination of actions, where digital media are used for managing participation and coordinating goals rather than the self-organization of action. On the other side of the extreme is the ‘connective action self-organizing networks’ that self-organize through social media, mainly with little or no organizational coordination of actions. In the middle of these two extremes of networks, a third hybrid type was introduced, ‘connective action organizationally enabled networks’, encompassing loose organizational coordination of action with formal and informal organizational actors that step back from setting strong agendas in favor of deploying social technologies to form networks around personalized action frames (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

The third research area relating to the discussion of the impacts of the Internet on activists’ internal interactions examines the relationship between utilizing online-communication and participation of individual activists in collective processes. This relationship is addressed through studies about collective identity and in increasing debates around the rise of so-called ‘slacktivism’. Thinkers of contemporary activism have paid great attention to the process in which people who have shared beliefs and a sense of solidarity participate in collective action. While traditional social movement theories, most prominently the resource mobilization approach, have focused on the formal organization of movements to secure resources and collective actions (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), new social movement theories have been concerned about the role of collective identity in social movement networks as the prerequisite of participation in collective actions (Cohen, 1985; Klandermans, 1994; Melucci, 1989). Melucci, who made great contributions to the concept of collective identity in contemporary activism, referred to this as “an interactive and shared definition produced by a number of individuals (or groups at a more complex level) concerning the orientation of their action and the field of opportunities and constraints in which such action is to take place” (1996, p. 70). By being interactive and shared, he emphasized that this definition should be “constructed and negotiated through recurrent process of activation of the relations that bind actors together” (p. 70). Thus, the collective identity process refers to “a network of active relationships between the actors, who interact, communicate, influence each other, negotiate, and make decisions” (p. 71). Besides

forms of organization, Melucci identified communication channels and technologies of communication as constitutive parts in this relationship network (p. 71).

Several review and empirical studies have contributed to this theoretical debate by concentrating, specifically, on Internet technology to explore if it can serve as a platform for the development of collective identity. These studies fall within two major camps. Optimists suggest that the development of collective identity benefits from establishment of online communication channels among activists. Garrett (2006) stressed that the Internet has promoted the perception among individuals that they are a member of a larger community by sharing the same goals; therefore, reinforcing collective identity. Drawing on the notion by Melucci that “collective action in itself is an indication that the actors involved have achieved a certain extent of collective identity” (Melucci, 1995, cited in Nip, 2004, p. 26), Nip (2004) concluded the fact that the Internet has contributed to coordinating actions in many local and transnational cases, demonstrating that it has succeeded in stimulating collective identity among actors. Also, his empirical study showed that the online bulletin board that the Queer Sisters, a lesbian activist group in Hong Kong launched, played a successful role in establishing a sense of solidarity and trust among the members.

In contrast, skeptical scholars noted that online communication is insufficient for encouraging a strong collective identity that is necessary for sustained collective action. Earl and Schussman (2002) warned that the spread of online activism has been accompanied the decline of commitment and the rise of protest ‘users’ rather than ‘members’. This will weaken the network of activists and threaten the maintenance and coordination of future social organizations, as van Laer (2010) asserted. Diani (2000) discussed the issue that virtual networks cannot promote collective identity when they are not backed by real social linkages. He asserted that under such conditions, participation happens only occasionally, with activists otherwise not tied in a committed relationship. In recent years, as the use of social media for activism has grown, those voices skeptical about the harmful impacts of the Internet on activists’ shared identity and commitment are concerned mainly about the rise of so-called ‘slacktivism’ instead of activism.

Slacktivism has become somewhat of a buzzword (Christensen, 2012). In an extremely negative sense, it has been described as “feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact” (Morozov, 2009, para. 1); a “five-minute activism” (Earl & Kimport, 2011, p. 74)

by people who are unwilling to ‘get their hands dirty’ and engage in actual efforts to achieve real social and political goals (Christensen, 2012). As a not an entirely ineffective phenomenon, slacktivism was referred to as “low-risk, low-cost activity via social media, whose purpose is to raise awareness, produce change, or grant satisfaction to the person engaged in the activity” (Rotman et al., 2011, p. 821). The phenomenon does not include online political activities involving more effort and personal risk (Jordan & Taylor, 2004).

Critiques of slacktivism have related slacktivists’ concern about social or political issues to the persuasion of ‘selfish and narcissistic’ purposes rather than contributing to the achievement of societal benefits (Breuer & Farooq, 2012; Morozov, 2009). Even with the aim of pursuing a collective good, critics consider these ‘least effort-consuming’ activities ineffective, as political change requires time investment and a very real risk to personal safety (Christensen, 2012; Skoric, 2012). Regardless of its real outcomes, it has been demonstrated that slacktivism can enhance the political interest and engagement of a normally politically passive public; for instance, as Breuer and Farooq (2012) showed in the case of the Brazilian anti-corruption campaign. But with regards to people who are active in the offline realm (i.e. activists), there is a serious concern that the possibility of low-cost and low-risk activities on the Internet damages their offline participation. As Skoric and Poor (2013) explained: “The fear is that those who are highly engaged could become less engaged due to the lower barriers to entry for activity, however slight” (Skoric & Poor, 2013, p. 343). Slacktivism can satisfy previously active people’s motivation to take real action (Lee & Hsieh; 2013) and distract them from making more meaningful contributions (Skoric & Poor, 2013). Therefore, as Morozov (2009) maintained, there is the possibility that a significant portion of activist population chooses slacktivist options over more risky activities more likely to get them in trouble with authorities. It should be noted that such a claim about how slacktivism hurts activism is hardly supported by empirical data. Most of the empirical studies on slacktivism concentrate on its consequence for the political participation of ordinary citizens.

This section has thus presented theoretical and empirical debates about the role of ICTs and the Internet for communication and organization within and among activist groups and for the participation of individual activists. Garrett (2006) asserted any discussion on the impacts of the Internet on participation level and organizational issues demonstrates how social movements’ mobilization structure is affected by online communication. McCarthy (1996) referred to

‘mobilization structure’ as the agreed mechanism of engaging in collective actions, which includes the organizational forms of social movements. Thus, the abovementioned studies can have implications for underrating potential changes in the mobilization structure of movements that operate in the Internet age, although they have rarely discussed this change in an explicit way. According to McCarthy’s (1996) definition, the mobilization structure also includes the forms of collective actions or activists’ tactical repertoire. Vegh (2003), and Van Laer and Van Aelsts (2010) acknowledged that besides supporting activists’ conventional tactics, digital technologies have offered advocacy groups a wider range of actions, mainly internet-based tactics, such as online petitions, email bombings, and virtual sit-ins. Therefore, it has expanded their repertoire of contention. Wells (2015) claimed that the change can go beyond the extension of conventional action repertoire, and may create new action possibilities that do not imply application or the extension of pre-existed tactics.

3.2 Research Questions

The background reviews of Chapter 2 demonstrate that Iranian women’s rights activism is no exception to the assumption made by social movements and communication scholars that activists are in desperate need of media. Over the course of Iranian history, since its emergence during the Constitutional Revolution to the contemporary era, the activists have used all media available in order to communicate with the Iranian people. They have struggled to gain a higher presence in the country’s print media as much as they have relied on establishing their own media. The long list of women’s press, some of them introduced in Chapter 2, shows the efforts of the activists to increase their independence in putting women’s rights issues on the public agenda. As noted in Chapter 2, in the early 2000s the activists began to embrace the Internet as their alternative media.

Women’s rights activists pursue two main inter-related objectives through communication with the Iranian public. First, they aim to enhance societal awareness towards women’s rights. Second, they seek to de-legitimize discriminatory gender policies and legislation to gain the support of public opinion to pressure the government. The activists-public relationship rarely aims at mass mobilization, as the organizational structure of the women’s rights movement and its constructive groups is based on recruitment and mobilization of professional members. As Diani (2000) stated “any discussion of the impact of computer-mediated communication has to acknowledge the differentiation in the organizational forms adopted by social movements (or

better, by the organized actors operating within them)” (p. 392). The organization of Iranian women’s rights movement, to a large extent, conforms to Tarrow’s (2011) observation of many contemporary movements:

What we see in movements today is a new type of professional, who is not dependent on mass membership but specializes in the diffusion of information and the construction of temporary coalitions among groups of activists. Possession of such skills makes it possible to mobilize a large reservoir of support at short notice, allowing movement organizations to be both small and professional.

As a new social movement, the Iranian women’s rights movement is organized around a decentralized and leaderless network of actors, the activist groups, and individuals, which come together to form issue-based coalitions and campaigns. The activist groups within this movement, to a great extent, adopt the same non-hierarchical organizational structure. The mobilizing structure of women’s rights groups and movement is centered on the gaining active participation of women’s rights activists rather than mobilizing as large a population as possible. These characteristics illustrate the significance of internal relations for Iranian women’s rights activism and underline the role of communication technologies in this relationship network. The previous chapter illustrated that the activist groups began to employ the Internet as their internal communication channel during the first term of the Ahmadinejad presidency.

As already mentioned, the core objective of this study is to explore the impacts of Internet-mediated communication on Iranian women’s rights activism. Based on this chapter’s readings, and the Chapter 2 review of this activism’s characteristics, activists’ public and internal relations are defined as central to the conceptual framework of this thesis. This thesis seeks to explore how patterns of women’s rights activism’s communication with the Iranian public have been affected by their online media. In which ways have the impacts of activism’s online media been experienced as beneficial to its efforts at reaching the public? And has Internet usage inflicted any harm on the activists’ relation with their audiences? This study also aims at exploring what promises and pitfalls Internet deployment has had for women’s rights activists’ internal relations. It examines whether and how the utilization of Internet technology has influenced the activist groups’ intra- and inter-communication and organization. Equally, it seeks to uncover the impacts of online communication on the participation of individual activists in the activism’s

collective processes. Therefore, the first two research questions of this thesis are specified as below:

RQ1: How has the utilization of the Internet affected women's rights activism's public communication?

RQ2: How has the utilization of the Internet affected women's rights activism's internal relations?

The words 'Utilization of the Internet' in these RQs highlight that in order to provide a better understanding of the impacts of the Internet, this investigation should also uncover how women's rights activists have utilized the Internet as both their independent media to reach out to public and as an internal communication channel to interact internally.

RQ1 lies within the string of theoretical and empirical studies discussing the role of the Internet as activists' alternative media (Section 3.1.1). As mentioned in Section 3.1.2, another thread of research on activists' relation with the public has discussed the prominence of mainstream media presentation for activist groups and movements. For Iranian women's rights activism, like other activist groups in the country, the print media enjoy a unique position due to the absence of independent broadcasting channels (see Chapter 2, section 2.2.2). Since its emergence, this activism has been struggling for a larger presence in the country's print media. Particularly since the 1990s, as a constructive part of Iran's civil society, the reformist and independent press has played a key role in the process of democratization, including gender equality. Informed by the theoretical discussions and the prominent role of print media for Iranian women's rights movement, activists' online media is also examined in this study in terms of its influence on the print media agenda. Therefore, the third RQ investigates:

RQ3: How has women's rights activists' online media affected the resonance of women's rights issues in the Iranian press?

The three research questions specified in this section direct investigation of the impacts of the Internet on Iranian women's rights activism. To evaluate the applicability of previous studies to this activism's experience of Internet-mediated communication in the specific context of Iran, three data analysis chapters will discuss the empirical results in light of the discussions presented in this chapter. Also, the research contribution to broad theoretical debates, which aided in the formation of the research questions (social movements' opportunity structure, framing process,

and mobilization structure; and agenda-setting and agenda-building), will be presented in the concluding chapter.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains the design of the research methods worked out to investigate the research questions. It begins by providing an overview of the methodological approach and giving reasons for adopting ‘within-methods triangulation’. It will then go on to present data collection methods and lay out data analysis processes. Lastly, the ethical aspects of the research and data collection limitations will be discussed.

4.1 Methodological Approach and Research Design

Because of its flexible methods of investigation, the qualitative approach is used to look at the dynamics of how a social phenomenon functions, and to examine effects or consequences that can arise from that phenomenon (Ritchie & Ormston, 2013). To address the exploratory and evaluative nature of this study, the qualitative research strategy was adopted. The semi-structured qualitative interview was chosen as the principal method of data collection. Rapley (2004) defined qualitative interviewing as “social encounters where speakers collaborate in producing retrospective (and prospective) accounts or versions of their past (or future) actions, experiences, feelings and thoughts” (p. 16). It is not a neutral tool of data gathering, but an active interaction between researcher and informants of the phenomenon (Fontana & Frey, 2000). In such a “fact-producing interaction” (Gomm, 2004, p. 230), researchers assist interviewees in describing perceptions they would otherwise find irrelevant or feel inexpressible in their daily social context (Newton, 2010). These potentials have made interviewing one of the most widely used qualitative data collection methods; also in media and communication studies (Jensen, 2002a, p. 240).

In this research, semi-structured interviews were well suited in providing rich and detailed insight into the practices and impacts of women’s rights activism on the net. The study was, however, inevitably subject to a number of associated limitations of qualitative interviewing. Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, and Sechrest (1966) noted that interviews are limited to respondents who are accessible and are willing to cooperate. Jensen (2002a) argued that the difficulty of interviewing, which emerges from the significance of the language to the method, is that “people do not always say what they think, or mean what they say” (p. 240). Myers and Newman (2007)

highlighted that a restriction of the method is caused by the interviewees' concern with how much the interviewer can be trusted. To address this concern, the interviewees may choose not to uncover information they consider to be 'sensitive'. A very similar practical concern is "how interviewees respond to us based on who we are in their lives, as well as the social categories to which we belong, such as age, gender, class and race" (Miller & Glassner, 2010, p. 134).

To address these limitations, and to add to the validity of the interview results, the mixed data collection technique, or 'within-methods triangulation, was adopted with respect to the first and second research questions, which seek to investigate the impacts of women's rights activists' Internet use on their public communication and internal relations. Denzin (1970, 1989) introduced two types of method triangulation: within-methods and between-methods. While between-methods refers to the combination of two or more qualitative and quantitative data collection approaches, within-methods triangulation is the use of either multiple quantitative or multiple qualitative methods (Denzin, 2009, pp. 308-310). Methodological triangulation has been given particular attention by qualitative researchers as a strategy to gain several perspectives on the same empirical context, and to verify and validate the findings (Jensen, 2002b). With respect to RQs 1 and 2, followed by interviews with women's rights activists, and in order to supplement and verify the results from the interviews, four cases of Internet utilization by women's rights groups and campaigns were examined through the online observation method. Investigation on RQ3 - "How has activists' online media affected the resonance of women's rights issues in the Iranian press?" – was conducted through interviews with women's rights activists and print media journalists. Interrogation of the interviewees' testimonies with regards to this RQ would have required content analysis of the country's print media, something beyond the limit of this research.

"Observation, in its different forms, tries to understand practices, interactions, and events, which occur in a specific context from the inside as a participant or from the outside as a mere observer" (Flick, 2009, p. 282). Although much research has been done on the adaptation of offline social research methodologies to online settings (Baym & Markham, 2009; Hine, 2005; Johns, Chen, & Hall, 2004; Mann & Stewart, 2000), few studies have investigated specific online observation (Markham, 2011; Nørskov & Rask, 2011). Nørskov and Rask (2011) defined online observation as "a method employed to study interactions in virtual communities in their natural setting" (p. 21). They identified a number of promises and limitations in an online setting

observation compared to offline observation. First, in online observation, the observational data exists in written form, which lowers the risk of interpretative judgments by the observer. Furthermore, observing people's behavior in an online context is certainly less obtrusive, in that the researcher can lurk and not be noticed. The authors offered that this prevents undesired influences on the observed setting and decreases the possibility of the observer being contacted and influenced by the actors in the research field, the benefits of which are also caused by the possibility of anonymous observation (Markham, 2011; Nørskov & Rask, 2011). Nørskov and Rask (2011) specified two major limitations of online observation. First, private conversation; for instance, those communicated on social messaging applications are not normally accessible by the observer. Second, due to the lack of a social presence, the researcher may lose the diverse interpretations that are communicated through dimensions such as body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. These limitations may increase the risk of overlooking important issues and misinterpret communicated data. In this research the impacts of these limitations were undermined by mixed data collection method.

4.2 Qualitative Interviews

In semi-structured or standardized open-ended interviews, the researcher has a list of questions to cover. But the questions are open-ended to allow participants to express as many viewpoints and experiences as they desire and to allow the researcher to follow up on those questions (Turner III, 2010). This form of interview allows the interviewer to pursue a line of discussion initiated by the interviewees, and enables interviewees to answer in their own terms, but also set a sort of structure for comparison between responses by covering the same topics (Edward & Hollands, 2013, p. 29).

In this thesis, individual, face-to-face, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 Iranian women's rights activists and seven press journalists. In selecting interviewees, two principles were considered for each interviewee group: the activists and the journalists. Applying Polkinghorne's (2005) logic, the word 'selection' is used here instead of 'sampling', as the latter is more applicable to quantitative studies and carries the connotation of representativeness. As Polkinghorne (2005) explained, in qualitative investigations, the aim is not to enable findings to be applied to a population. The focus instead "is on describing, understanding, and clarifying a human experience. It requires collecting a series of intense, full, and saturated descriptions of the experience under investigation" (p. 139).

The first criterion for the selection of women's rights activists was to consider the definition of an activist as adopted in this research (see Chapter 1, Section 1.1). The potential interviewees were those who described themselves as women's rights activists (i.e. have a history of activism); who have devoted a significant amount of time and energy to women's rights causes, despite known risks; and who was involved in the activism network. With respect to the final point, it should be noted that, at the time of the interviews, respondents were all active participants of one or more informal women's rights groups or NGOs. Also, they all had a history of cooperating with women's rights campaigns; specifically, three interviewees were previous members of the OMS campaign, the best-known women's rights campaign in Iran (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2.6). Regarding the interviewed journalists, the initial selection factor was to find those who had a record of working on women-related subjects. It was obvious that journalists unfamiliar with this subject could not provide responses based on real practices. The seven interviewed journalists had published numerous gender-related stories and opinion articles in the leading and largely circulated Iranian national press.

Among the activists and journalists who passed the first filter, the final interviewees were selected based on the maximum variation technique. The technique's strengths relate to the logic that "any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects or impacts of a program" (Patton, 1990, p. 172). This variety was ensured for both interviewee groups. The researcher selected women's rights activists with different lengths of involvement in activism in order to reflect diverse viewpoints of generations. Having gotten involved with women's rights affairs before the 1979 Revolution, three interviewed activists had over thirty years of experience in the activism, while four had between ten and 20 years, and four young activists had less than ten years of experience. In addition, to uncover the experiences of those contributing in different spheres of women's rights activism, interviewees were selected from activists with heterogeneous occupational categories. Among the interviewed activists: a lawyer, a women's workshop instructor, a website manager, a website developer, a social worker, two NGO managers, two journalists, two gender study researchers, and two podcast producers – note that two interviewees had two specialties. And finally, to avoid being restricted to the viewpoints of activists in the capital, two interviewees (Interviewees 2 and 6) were selected from women's rights groups operating in smaller cities. Although, this is not to say that the interviewed activists

based in Tehran had no operation in other cities. Table 4.1 outlines the interviewees' profiles. Regarding the interviewed journalists, the combination of respondents was set in a way that would provide evidence about the resonance of different aspects of women's rights in the print media. The seven interviewed journalists had interchangeably worked on cases about the participation of women in the political structure, legislation related to women and family, and problems of socially harmed women. In addition, the researcher contacted journalists from different, although popular, reformist and moderate journals and newspapers. It should be noted that journalists who are interested in woman's rights issues rarely work for the conservative press. Seven interviewed journalists worked for seven distinct newspapers. Table 4.2 outlines the interviewed journalists' profiles.

The very common concept of data saturation was used as the guideline for defining the number of interviews. Data saturation happens when data becomes repetitive and the collection of new data does not shed further light on the issue under investigation (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 139; Mason, 2010). Based on this concept, qualitative researchers should continue identifying interviewees until they do not hear anything that has not been raised before (Edwards & Hollands, 2013, p. 65). Thus, while the number of samples is representative of the types of people in a quantitative research, in a qualitative study it is the range of meanings that should determine the number of interviewees (Edwards & Hollands, 2013, p. 65). During the last interviews with the activists and journalists, the researcher noticed that the expressed viewpoints became repetitive. Although different stories were told, the conveyed meanings were the same as in the preceding interviews.

Creating effective interview questions is a key component of an interview design, as it allows the researcher to dig into the experiences and/or knowledge of the participants in the interviews (Turner III, 2010). In this research, McNamara's (2009) suggestions for the design of effective interview questions were considered: (a) using open-ended wording, (b) constructing neutral questions, (c) creating clearly worded questions, and (d) carefully asking 'why' questions that would put respondents on the defensive. By considering these criteria, initial questions to be covered during all the interviews were set (see Appendix A for the interview questions). However, the sequence of the questions and their wording were shifting in relation to different interviewees. Also depending on the given answers, many follow-up questions or prompts were asked.

The interviews with ten activists took place during October 2014 to January 2015. The researcher long endeavored to find access to a well-known women’s right activist (indicated as interviewee 11 in Table 4.1) and finally succeeded seven months after the tenth interview, when the interview analysis process was completed. The analysis of her testimony did not generate new themes, which proved once more that the data saturation level had been achieved. However, quotes from her experiences and viewpoints were included in explanations about the developed themes. Roughly all the interview sessions took more than two hours. Interviews with the journalists were initiated in 2016. Five interviews were conducted from April to June 2016 and two in September 2016. On average, they lasted about two hours. It should be mentioned that the interviewees’ requests, mostly with regards to the venue of interviews, were completely met in order to provide them with the utmost convenience for conversation. Also, they were offered on and off the record talks, and were given assurances that the recordings would be exclusively heard by the researcher for transcription before being erased.

Interviewee	Gender	Areas of expertise	Years of experience as women’s rights activist
Interviewee 1	Female	NGO manager	More than 30 years
Interviewee 2	Female	Journalist	9 years
Interviewee 3	Male	Gender studies researcher and podcast producer	8 years
Interviewee 4	Female	Former administrator of a known women’s right campaign’s website, and the current manager of a women’s rights group’s website	13 years
Interviewee 5	Female	Social worker	9 years
Interviewee 6	Male	Developer of a number of women’s rights websites, and podcast producer	8 years
Interviewee 7	Male	NGO manager	More than 30 years
Interviewee 8	Female	Women’s workshops instructor	More than 30 years
Interviewee 9	Female	Lawyer	18 years

Interviewee 10	Female	Gender studies researcher	15 years
Interviewee 11	Female	Journalist	16 years

Table 4.1: Interviewed activists' profile

Interviewee	Gender	The publication political affiliation	Years of experience as journalist
Interviewee J1	Female	A well-known moderate newspaper	16 years
Interviewee J2	Female	Among the most popular reformist newspapers	14 years
Interviewee J3	Male	A well-known moderate newspaper	8 years
Interviewee J4	Male	Among the most popular reformist newspapers	10 years
Interviewee J5	Female	Among the most popular reformist newspapers	6 years
Interviewee J6	Female	Among the most popular moderate newspapers	17 years
Interviewee J7	Female	A well-known reformist newspaper	7 years

Table 4.2: Interviewed journalists' profile

4. 2. 1 The Interview analysis

When it comes to considering different approaches towards qualitative interview analysis, the major distinction lies between those methods that strongly focus on the language and relate to social constructionist tradition and those that are more concerned with the content of interview data and are classified under realist epistemology (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 142). As this research aims to understand participants' experiences, the thematic analysis method, which is very much compatible with the latter group's experiential nature (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 142), was selected for analysis of the interview data. Braun & Clarke (2006) defined thematic analysis as the process of "identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns

(themes) within data” (p. 79). Thematic analysis represents a purely qualitative and detailed account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013).

Drawing on Braun and Clarke’s (2006), and Braun, Clarke, and Terry (2015) pragmatic view of the method, four phases were conducted for the thematic analysis of the collected interviews. As a first step, the recorded interviews were transcribed. By reading and re-reading these transcripts, the researcher familiarized herself with the data and noted the potential points of analytical interest, as Braun et al. (2015) suggested. In the next phase, the transcripts were initially coded to identify the key patterns and analytic ideas in the data. The codes are “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63). Within the frame of the three research questions, the interviews’ thematic analysis was principally inductive or ‘data-driven’, as there was no ‘pre-existing coding frame’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The codes were derived while reading through the transcripts. They were written on the transcripts next to the relevant extract of data. Then the coding lists containing the codes, the specifications of the interviewees who raised them, and the main related extracts of data were all prepared for the next phase of analysis.

The third step focused on the broader level of the analysis and involved sorting the codes that conveyed the same meaning into potential themes, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). During this phase, the lists of codes were reviewed to identify those codes that form a potential pattern of interpretation. These codes were grouped into different levels of candidate themes. While some initial codes formed the main overarching themes, others formed sub-themes, and those which were not truly relevant to the research questions were discarded.

The last phase of interview analysis involved the refinement of the compiled themes and sub-themes. In this phase, a central question introduced by Braun and his colleagues (2006, 2015) for checking the quality of the identified themes was considered: Can the researcher identify a central organizing concept for each candidate theme? They asserted that identifying these concepts is critical to ensure that themes are internally coherent and distinct from each other (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this phase, a review of candidate themes and sub-themes, and their related data extract, resulted in three forms of modification. First, data extracts that did not properly fit one theme were either discarded or assigned a new theme. Second, themes and sub-themes with overlapping concepts were combined to form new ones. Finally, those that

conveyed more than one concept were split. At the end of this phase, the final themes, their names, and their definitions, which include their related sub-themes – if they had any – and the extracts of data were finalized to be thoroughly presented in the data analysis chapters. Table 4.3 summarizes this research’s four phases of the interviews’ thematic analysis. It should be noted that the interviews were conducted and transcribed in Farsi. Then the statements that were selected to be quoted in the empirical chapters were translated into English.

Phases of the interviews’ thematic analysis	
I	The interviews were fully transcribed
II	The transcripts were initially coded
III	The codes were grouped into different levels of main overarching themes and sub-themes
IV	The themes and sub-themes were reviewed. Their definitions were finalized.

Table 4.3: The interviews’ thematic analysis phases (adopted from Braun & Clarke, 2006)

4.3 Online Observation

After completion of the thematic analysis, in an effort to triangulate and complement the interview findings, the online activities of four women’s rights groups and campaigns were examined through online observation. It is very popular in qualitative studies to verify interviewees’ responses with the observation of their behavior in the environment under study. In this research, however, the observational data was not obtained from online activities of the interviewed activists but collected from cases initiated by women’s rights activist groups and campaigns. The reason is that a large part of the interviewees’ testimonies about the utilization and impacts of the Internet was concentrated on the activists’ collective use of the Internet. Therefore, observation of their individual activities could not verify their statements. Even when they spoke of the individual activists’ on the Internet, they not only concentrated on their own Internet use, but also referred to that of their co-activists. To investigate interview findings that emerged concerning individual activists’ online activities, the online observation expanded to the Facebook profiles of four activists who were members of the observed campaigns.

‘Changing the Parliament’s Male Face’ or ‘Women for Parliament’, and ‘Stepdaughter’ were selected as the campaign cases because they were the best-known women’s campaigns at the time, as remarked earlier in Chapter 2 (Section, 2.3). Besides a series of on-the-ground

activities, these campaigns saw considerable online activity during their existence. In addition to the campaigns' collective online sites, the Facebook profiles of four activists who were highly engaged with these campaigns were also observed. To identify these four activists, the researcher searched for the campaigns' names in Facebook search section. After the campaign profiles, the most number of generated results were updated by these activists. The group cases Bidarzani (the Persian equivalent for 'Feminism') and *Khaneh Amn* (Safe Home) were selected because they were among the popular activist groups at the time, and, assessed by their Alexa ranking, their websites had the highest number of monthly incoming traffic compared to other women's rights groups in Iran.

The data analysis chapters will explain that the interview analysis generated evidence with respect to the three most used online technologies by women's rights activists: e-mail groups, websites, and SNSs. The researcher's restriction for the observation of the activists' e-mail groups will be explained later in this chapter. The observational analysis was conducted on the cases' websites and Facebook profiles. Facebook was selected among the social networking sites operated by these cases, because for all four cases, it was the most active in terms of number of posts, and the most popular in terms of the number of followers. The researcher acted as a complete observer and did not interact with the websites and Facebook pages. Particularly, in online observation, where the interactive nature of the Internet escalates the risk of unintended influence on researchers, being a complete observer serves as the best option to maintaining the objectivity of the research (Nørskov & Rask, 2011).

The online observation process launched after the completion of the interview analysis with respect to the first and second research questions. Two group cases, Bidarzani and Safe Home, were observed on a daily basis for four months, starting from March 2015. March was selected, since normally under the pretext of International Women's Day, 8 March, women's rights activists increase their online activities. This enabled the researcher to acquire optimal information from observation. The Stepdaughter campaign ended in August 2014, before the observation process started. Therefore, the campaign's last four months' archived posts were observed. The Women for Parliament campaign was the last analyzed case to be researched. The websites and Facebook profiles related to this campaign were observed for four months, starting from October 2015, when the campaign issued its first public statement, up to the ultimate

statement of the campaign in February 2016. Followed by a brief introduction to these cases, the observational analysis process is explained in more details.

Safe Home

This group was founded in 2013 “by a group of activists who focus on preventing and tackling domestic violence” (“Who we are,” 2015, para. 1). The group’s foremost objective is to assist women who are victims of domestic violence by encouraging them to speak out, and providing them with guidance on how to learn to bring an end to the abuse (“Who we are,” 2015). The subsequent objective of Safe Home activists is to raise social awareness on the different forms of domestic violence; how to assist the victims; and about the strengths and restrictions of the country’s legislation in dealing with this social phenomenon (“Who we are,” 2015).

Besides offline activities, like holding panel discussions and providing phone consulting services, the group maintains significant online presence through its website³¹ and social networking sites’ profiles. Although the number of social media followers does not remain static, at the time of observation, the group’s Facebook profile³² was the most followed amongst the other cases. Among the Safe Home Facebook followers were prominent figures like Mrs. Shahindokht Mollaverdi, Rouhani’s Vice President for Women and Family Affairs.

Bidarzani

The Bidarzani group was founded in 2010 in response to a new set of modifications in the ‘Family Protection Act’ that were being reviewed by the Iranian Parliament. The group, which initially consisted of thirteen women’s rights activists, carried out a diverse set of on-the-ground and digital activities mainly through its website and Facebook page to publicize the bill and its adverse effects (Zangeneh, 2015). The group, initially named *Ghanoone Khanevadeye Barabar* (Equal Family Law), was renamed Bidarzani in 2012 as it broadened its activities to five main fields: “changing laws that are discriminatory against women, eliminating violence against women, fostering job creation and entrepreneurship, improving health education, and furnishing reproductive rights education to women” (Zangeneh, 2015, p. 362). While the group interacts with other women’s rights activists by holding workshops and seminars, it mainly targets the

31 <http://www.khanehamn.org/>

32 <https://www.facebook.com/khaneh.amn>

Iranian public through its websites³³ and social media profiles³⁴. As the group's 'collective media', Bidarzani's website is regularly updated with gender-focused content by members and guest writers (About us, 2015).

Changing the Parliament's Male Face/Women for Parliament Campaign

This campaign came ahead of the February 2016 parliamentary election, in which the reformists managed to dominate the parliament. In the run-up to the vote, a group of women's rights activists launched it to push for greater women's presence in the legislature. It was initiated by prominent women's rights activists, such as publisher Shahla Lahiji and author Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani. It also won the support of some renowned cultural and political female figures in the country. The organizers aimed at undermining the dominance of men in the parliament, and hoped to see the number of women in parliament eventually grow to at least 50, or 30 percent, if not in the February 2016 election, then in the future ("About the campaign", 2016). Aside from that, they planned to promote the candidates of both sexes who supported greater women's rights ("About the campaign", 2016). In addition to promoting its cause in print media, in holding meetings, and in visiting officials and MPs, the campaign maintained a significant online presence through its website³⁵ and social networking sites' profiles³⁶. The personal Facebook profiles observed for this campaign were maintained by 33 and 42-year-old women's rights activists and gender study researchers (hereinafter: Activists C and D).

Women's breakthrough in the 2016 February election cannot be separated from the efforts of the women's rights activists in this campaign. The number of women who were elected into the 2016 parliament was twice that of women in the previous one. Seventeen women were elected, a record since the 1979 Revolution.

Stepdaughter Campaign

In September 2013, the conservative-led parliament in Iran passed the Parentless Children Protection act. The bill included a clause outlawing a stepfather's marriage to his mature adopted daughter, allowing exceptions depending on family court's approval. The clause turned into a

33 www.bidarzani.com

34 <https://www.facebook.com/bidarzani/>

35 www.women4parliament.org

36 <https://www.facebook.com/women4parliament/>

controversy. Proponents of this piece of legislation viewed it as being in the interest of adopted children on the grounds that no law banned such marriages in the past, allowing debauched men take advantage of this legal loophole. They claimed that there have been numerous reports of such unions. In reaction, opponents said that even speaking publicly about such marriages would harm stepchildren because their guardians would view them as their wives-to-be. They claimed that this change in view would have consequences and would raise the rate of sexual assault against such girls. The proponents however maintained that the adoption of such an act would keep these girls safe from sexual abuse.

A campaign was formed by opposing women and children rights' activists to get the Iranian legislature to overturn the controversial clause. Besides various on-the-ground endeavors, such as meeting with MPs, soliciting senior clerics and political figures, and holding meetings with relevant experts, the campaign had a significant web presence. The campaigners' efforts and public backlashes made President Rouhani's Deputy for Women and Family Affairs promise to push for the parliament to withdraw the clause. She then submitted a new motion to the parliament to have the controversial clause dropped altogether.

Unlike the Women for Parliament campaign, this campaign did not have a website and social networking profiles under its own name. Various concerned activist groups devoted their online platforms to the promotion of the campaign's cause. One of the groups most involved in this campaign was Iran Adoption. This group created a separate tab in its websites under 'Marriage with Stepdaughter' in order to provide an online platform not only for reporting its own activities, but, to a greater extent, for broadcasting any efforts made jointly or independently by other activist groups and individuals to overturn the clause. Observation was conducted on both this tab³⁷ and Iran Adoption's Facebook³⁸ posts, which were updated in relation to the campaign. The personal Facebook profiles examined in relation to this case were those of a 29-year-old women's rights activist-cum-journalist and a 45-year-old women's rights activist-cum-lawyer (hereinafter: Activists A and B).

37Therefore, in the data analysis chapters Stepdaughter website refers to this specific tab:
<http://iranadoption.com/?cat=65>

38 <https://www.facebook.com/iranadoption>

4.3.1 Observational analysis

Observation of the cases was conducted with respect to the findings generated from the interviews’ thematic analysis. In fact, the interview evidence served as the guide for observational analysis. This guide provided a systematic structure in which the researcher recorded and analyzed the observational data (Nicholls et.al, 2013). Schneider and Foot (2004) found two sets of approach to online sites analysis: (a) those that are more concerned with the content of a site, and (b) those that are more focused on the structures and features of the units of analysis. They discussed that both approaches are incomplete by their own, as “connectivity matters as much as content” (p. 4). Relying on this assertion, and given the fact that the interview findings were pertinent to both the content and features of the activists’ online sites, both approaches were applied in this research. The types and quantities of reviewed content posted during the observation periods are displayed in Table 4. 4.

Online platform	Type of content	Safe Home	Bidarzani	Women for Parliament campaign	Stepdaughter campaign
website	Articles	82	116	98	30
	e-brochures, e-booklets, and slide share presentation	16	7	0	1
	Audiovisual contents (podcasts, videos, and images)	8	9	25	1
Facebook	Textual posts	4	26	96	37
	Audio-visual posts (Audios, videos, and images)	35	5	70	2
	Comments	97	25	327	240

Table 4.4: Types and quantities of observed contents

Note 1: The Facebook row for campaign cases includes posts in collective and individual profiles.

Note 2: In the websites and Facebook pages, articles or statuses were attached with images considered as textual posts. Those posts, the core of which is an image, but are described by few lines of text, are assigned to the audio-visual category.

The initial phase of the analysis was run on all types of content on the websites and Facebook profiles in order to verify the interviewees' assertions about the modes of utilization of these online platforms. In this phase, the contents were analyzed in terms of their manifest meanings (for textual contents) and their motifs (for audiovisual updates). The second phase was carried out to find evidence in relation to interview themes and sub-themes describing the impacts of the activists' online spaces. That websites and Facebook profiles content which was related to interview findings were identified. Such content was then copied and pasted into Word documents and assigned to the related interview theme and sub-themes. The compiled content was then analyzed to illustrate the commonalities and differences with interviewees' assertions.

The structural analysis of the websites was required in order to shed light on interviewees' notions about a two-way form of communication with the public. The websites were observed for the identification of available features for visitors' engagement. Findings derived from observational analysis of the cases were then listed for themes and sub-themes to be represented in the data analysis chapters. Chapters 5 and 6 will present and discuss the findings of the interview and observational analyses with respect to RQs 1 and 2 in that order. The last data analysis chapter will expose those interview results which are responsive to the third RQ.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

The 'informed consent' of participants in a research, their anonymity, and the confidentiality of their information are the main ethical concerns in qualitative studies (Hopf, 2004). Informed consent refers to the research subjects' rights "to know that they are being researched, the right to be informed about the nature of the research and the right to withdraw at any time" (Ryen, 2011, p. 418). Prior to the interviews, the interviewees were informed about the general purpose of the research, the nature of the questions, and the approximate length of the sessions. Also possible risks of participation and likely social uses of the results were clearly spelled out. Therefore, all the respondents made informed decisions to take part in the individual face-to-face interviews. As far as observational data collection is concerned, informed consent was not the subject since the researcher acted as a complete outsider by solely observing the publicly available online sites and not interacting. The four observed individual profiles were also open to the public and the researcher did not follow them to be able to see their posts.

The issue of confidentiality assures participants that the data collected from them will be safeguarded. And anonymity provides the condition of rendering the participants unidentifiable

(Porr & Ployhart, 2004). It was explained to the participants that the results will be used for academic purposes. Also, it was clarified at the very beginning of the interview sessions that the researcher had no interest in revealing respondents' identities. However, maintaining anonymity and confidentiality is challenging in any Internet-mediated research context as such, when the reader can search the web for the interview excerpts and the interviewees' online practices (Maczewski et al., 2004). Therefore, in this thesis, not only is the respondents' anonymity maintained by assigning them numbers, but also any details in the interviews which could expose their identities have been concealed. Also, the anonymity of the four activists whose publicly available Facebook profiles were observed was maintained by indicating them with alphabets. Even when a comment on their posts was quoted, the follower was given pseudonym.

4.5 Data Collection Challenges and Limitations

The researcher faced two main challenges in interviewing women's rights activists. The first could be successfully handled. Following years of surveillance and repression under the Ahmadinejad administration, it was very challenging for the researcher, as an outsider to the activist groups, to find access to Iranian women's rights activists' networks and get them to share their stories and viewpoints. E-mails were sent to the candidate interviewees, in which the researcher identified herself, her affiliated institution, her research objectives, and the confidentiality and anonymity terms of the study. Initially, only four activists accepted to participate. But, fortunately, after meeting the researcher and being impressed by the research subject, these four activists accepted to link the researcher to the activists she had asked for. Thanks to their recommendation, the activists answered the researcher's e-mails and other interview sessions were set. The second challenge, which could not be handled ultimately, was to convince the activists who had left the country after 2009, but who had remained attached to women's rights groups inside Iran, to share their experiences. Both the researcher's efforts and the co-operation of a couple of interviewed activists failed to receive their consent.

The observation phase of data collection faced a challenge that could not be addressed and became the chief data collection limitation in this study. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, scholars have discussed that a limitation of online observation is associated with the difficulties in gaining access to private communications. This restriction affected this study. The researcher was not able to triangulate the interviewees' testimonies about the implications and impacts of the activists' e-mail groups through observation. The activists had an understandable concern

about the security of their e-mail groups as their private communication channels. Even the researcher's request from a number of the interviewed activists to provide her with a printed copy of some of their internal dialogues on their e-mail groups was rejected.

CHAPTER 5

WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVISM ON THE NET: THE IMPACTS ON ACTIVISTS' PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

Addressing the first research question, this chapter presents findings in relation to the impacts of activists' online media on their communication with the Iranian public. The interviewed activists differentiated between the modes of utilization and impacts of the three most utilized online platforms by women's rights activism: e-mail groups, websites, and Social Networking Sites (SNSs). The interview analysis illustrated that the e-mail group is the main Internet technology implicated for this activism's internal communication. There was an absolute lack of evidence to point at the use or impacts of e-mail groups on the activists' public communication. Therefore, the findings about e-mail groups will be presented in the next chapter, which concentrates on the activism's internal relations. The findings of this chapter, therefore, concentrate on activist websites and SNSs as the main Internet technologies utilized for the activism's public communication.

The impacts of activists' online media on their public communication are illustrated through five dominant themes that emerged from the interview analysis. The evidence produced by the observational analysis is presented with respect to each theme. Themes one, two, and three uncover how the activism's communication with the Iranian people has benefited from deployment of the Internet. The interview themes four and five reveal two pitfalls that are associated with those opportunities explained in the previous themes. Finally, the discussion section outlines the main findings of this chapter and discusses them in light of the studies presented in Chapter 3 (Section 3.1.1).

Before proceeding to the description of the impacts of the Internet, in order to provide a general picture of how women's rights activists utilize websites and SNSs for their public communication practices, it is necessary to explain a number of findings regarding information that is disseminated through these online technologies. The interviewees' testimonies, presented throughout this chapter, show that websites and SNSs are deployed to raise societal awareness toward: (a) women-related issues, and (b) the activism itself. To triangulate this finding, and to examine in practice how the activists utilize these online technologies, web sites' and Facebook

profiles' updates of all four cases were analyzed in terms of their manifest meaning for textual content, and dominant motifs for audiovisual updates. The results confirmed the aforementioned interview finding. During the observation period, the studied groups and campaigns utilized websites and social networking profiles, both collective and individual, to, above all, boost public awareness towards the gender-related issues they were addressing, disseminating information to make the public aware, particularly women, of their issues, as well as the deficits in the policy making and officials' actions relating to those issues. The particular issues addressed by each case were explained in Chapter 4 (Section 4.3). Throughout this chapter, more explanation will be provided.

In the second place, these online platforms were used to present information about the activists themselves. The websites and Facebook pages published posts reporting on the groups' and campaigns' goals, strategies, and activities, as well to familiarize the public with influential activists and their efforts. The observational analysis complemented the interview finding by revealing the third group of information disseminated to the Iranian public. It was uncovered only through the two cases concerning Bidarzani and Women for Parliament that activist websites and Facebook profiles were insignificantly used for informing the public about the possibilities of online collective actions, such as online petitions and photo campaigns. More explanation and examples of these trends of online information distribution by the observed cases are provided throughout the chapter.

It should also be noted that the interview and observational analyses illustrated that aside from the aforementioned information addressing the general public (i.e. information about women-related issues, about the activism, and about the possibilities of participation in online actions), a small portion of content on the activist websites is particularly directed toward activists. The evidence in relation to this finding is presented in the next chapter.

5.1 Theme One: Women rights' activists' online media has enabled them to inform the public beyond print media restrictions

The interview analysis indicates that for Iranian women's rights activists, websites have been the first and key alternative media to that of the controlled press. Interviewee 9, the high-profile activist-cum-lawyer explained that the first websites of women's rights activists were launched in reaction to the closure of the gender-specific press during Khatami's presidency. Interviewee

1, who has been working on women's issues since the 1979 Revolution, remembered the second term of Khatami's and the first term of Ahmadinejad's presidency:

Our access to the press was becoming more and more limited. Women's journals were being closed, either the reformist press which covered our causes. We even had difficulties in talking to people in public spaces.... At that time, websites were the only place through which we could have our say.

The notion that the Internet was initially utilized by activists as a substitute to a shut-down or controlled press is further clarified through two testimonies in which the terms 'immigration' and 'journey' were used as metaphors to describe the relocation of the offline publications to the Internet. Interviewee 3 stated: "It was not the activists' strategy.... They were forced to immigrate to this space [the Internet]." Interviewee 10 said: "A kind of pressure and force deprived us of the old media [the press] that we had. So, we took a journey to this alternative space [the Internet]. This strategy was set by force. It was not an absolute conscious decision."

Some interviewees held the notion that force was the most determining, but not the sole, reason behind the formation of women's websites. Interviewee 4, who had years of experience in administering activist Web sites, believed it was a combination of force and the personal capabilities of women's rights activists that put them among the early adopters of websites and blogging. She maintained that these activists could recognize the potential of the Internet as a substitute to the press and could exploit this technology because they were among the educated class of the society. Her point is also explicit in the following quote by Interviewee 2, activist-cum-journalist:

In comparison to other groups, such as labor activists, we had more people who were familiar with the know-how of website updating and article writing.... X and Y [two leading women's rights activists] even used to write articles in English. The known women's websites of that time, like *Madreseye Feministi* (The Feminist School) published these articles.

The interview analysis suggests that the free public communication lines that the Internet provided for the activists in its early days of adoption is yet its major advantage for the activism. Although the closure of the independent press has been periodical, and was reported less

frequently after the end of Ahmadinejad administration, state control of the media and editorial filters still restrict the presence of the activism in the Iranian press. Interviewees 10 and 11 explained this problem and highlighted the Internet ability's to circumvent these press restrictions. Besides its central assumption, the testimony by Interviewee 10 also directs attention to the challenge of Internet filtering, which will be discussed more at the end of this chapter (Section 5.6).

Interviewee 10: While your articles have to pass multiple filters of the press in order to get permission for publication, and you rarely have a place in the conservative media, which looks at women's rights activists as political opponents, the Internet creates a realm where there are no restrictions to the expression of thoughts. If our readers can pass the sites' filters, they will see no censorship in the content.

Interviewee 11: The activism's major problem with the Iranian press is that, because of the censorship, they can give little space to our demands. Besides, we have seen, in many cases, that the editors have no interest in women's demands or do not consider [the subject of] the article to be a current issue. We have to enter into long discussions to convince them that our issues are worth publishing.... It is easier to publish an article in the women's press. But their number is very limited and they have a low circulation.

Interviewee 11, the high-profile activist-cum-journalist, also emphasized that the editorial constraints in the Iranian press are escalated by state pressure. "Sometimes, they don't have the permission to work on specific issues. Sometimes, they attempt self-censorship to avoid getting noticed." In addition to providing a general explanation of the situation, respondents spoke of specific opportunities the activists have gained through the Internet, with its ability to circumvent press constraints. The most mentioned were: raising the popularity of activist groups and individuals; reporting politicians' actions; and addressing women's issues behind cultural taboos. Indeed, the following sub-themes explain these specific opportunities.

It should be highlighted that the interviewed activities' testimonies, with regards to these opportunities, were to a larger extent directed towards activist websites. It appeared that they consider SNSs of secondary importance in activists' public communication. A number of

observational evidence also underlines that it is the website that remains the activist groups' main online media, in spite of the rising popularity of social media in Iran. The researcher observed the existence of social media icons on all four websites, indicating the willingness of activists to engage users with their social media platforms. Further analysis, however, showed that activist groups and campaigns did not give SNSs equal weight to the websites. Indeed, during the time of observation, all four cases updated their Facebook profiles less frequently compared to their affiliated websites. Also, the majority of Facebook updates were unfolded from the websites' posts, demonstrating that the groups and campaigns devoted a relatively insignificant amount of time generating separate content for their Facebook profiles.

Statements by Interviewees 4 and 5 suggest that the failure to utilize social media in the early stages of its emergence has made the activist groups incapable of exploring its full potential to this date. These interviewees were very well aware of the secondary position of SNSs in activist groups' public relations. They believed one could make sense of this trend by remembering the challenges the women's rights movement encountered in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential election, when social media were gaining popularity in the country. Interviewee 4 stated: "While we were the front-runner in using e-mail and websites among Iranian activists, we lagged behind these networks [SNSs]". When asked for the reason, she replied: "Because when these networks [SNSs] were growing, the state repression had reached its climax. We lost our organization; we lost many [activists] who fled the country." Interviewee 5 provided the same reason: "The groups couldn't set a plan for social networks [SNSs], like the one we had for the websites, because after the 2009 incidents, many of them became almost inactive".

5.1.1 Activist groups and individuals have gained an opportunity to represent themselves

The interview and observational evidence has uncovered that the Internet has provided activists with a possibility that they could hardly gain via print media: to provide the Iranian public with information about themselves. Interviewees 7 and 8, who have been working on women's issues for more than 30 years, described that the press publishes articles about the activism issues, but rarely introduces the individuals and groups promoting women's rights. Interviewee 7 asserted this as the reason: "If the Internet did not exist, very few people would have known who we are, what we are aiming for, and what we do." Interviewee 8 compared the current time to the 80s and 90s, when the press was the only medium for the activists-public relationship. "During those

years, most of our efforts were conducted in absolute silence.” Referring to the workshops her group holds about issues such as domestic violence and marriage rights, she said: “Even now, women in the other provinces contact and ask us to hold workshops for them. Because of the Internet, people have become more aware of our activities.”

From the perspective of Interviewee 10, similar to the time that the press enabled the women’s rights movement to make its issues public, the Internet enabled the same to present itself and “enhance its public image”:

Before we used the Internet, women thought that we were very specific group of women and very different from them.... Neither the activists had the possibility to present themselves, nor the people had a way to find information about who we are. I think the Internet took the activists and the movement out of this isolation. Women understood that we are as one. They realized our activities could affect their lives and that we were not the voice of a particular social class, but the whole of female society.... I am sure that since the Internet [utilization], the movement has gained more trust and attention.

Interviewees’ assertions illustrate that since the early days of Internet embracement, numerous women’s rights groups and campaigns have launched their websites to, besides publishing information about the issues at hand, represent their identities, goals, and activities. *Taghir Baraye Barabari* (Change for Equality), for instance, was launched by the organizers of the One Million Signature Campaign in 2006. Interviewees 2 and 5, who were members of the campaign, explained that this website, along with about thirty other websites associated with campaign centers in the provinces, informed the people about the objectives and strategies of the campaign. Also, as Interviewee 5 recalled, the Web site had a section called *Kooche be Kooche* (From One Street to Another), in which activists’ experiences were published to make people aware of the difficulties members faced during the collection of signatures. Interviewee 9 pointed at the *Ghanoone Khanevadeye Barabar* (Fair Family Law), founded by the campaign against Ahmadinejad’s proposed amendment to the Family Protection Law (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2.6, for more information regarding this campaign). She said this website introduced the activists co-operating with the campaign and reported their lobbying activities to readers. Speaking of the Internet use by the groups they worked with, three other interviewed activists expressed that,

through their websites the groups familiarized people with their activities and member activists. Interviewee 11 also emphasized that activist groups “use the Internet for the introduction of activists who are paying with their personal lives to advance the status of women.”

This mode of Internet use was evident in various posts on the websites and, to a much lower extent, the Facebook profiles of the observed group and campaign cases. As mentioned in the opening of this chapter, the largest portion of online content produced by the activists in these cases supplied knowledge of the issues they were exposing. To a smaller extent the groups’ and campaigns’ web-presence introduced themselves to the people, in addition to the ‘About Us’ sections on the websites; public statements about campaigns’ objectives; minutes of activists’ meetings; news of their activities (e.g. their gatherings, seminars, workshops, and lobbying efforts); and articles about individual activists and their endeavors indicating such a pattern of utilizing websites and Facebook profiles.

Bidarzani and Safe Home provided descriptions of the groups’ objectives and policies on their websites’ ‘About Us’ tabs. The Bidarzani website also had a tab called ‘Report’. This tab reported meetings and seminars held independently or jointly by Bidarzani and other activist groups. Within the observation period, a minute extract from a panel meeting was published on this tab. Compared to the other cases, Bidarzani provided the greatest number of posts about the activists of the women’s rights movement since its formation up to the present time. The group posted biographies of the movement’s leaders before the 1979 Revolution under a section named ‘Who Are My Mothers?’ Aside from that, it introduced the high profile activists of the current time through interviews and profile articles. Just as well, a tab called ‘Equal Right Defenders’ reported the activities of individual activists defending women’s rights and how they are met with state crackdowns. The group’s Facebook profile also linked some of these website posts.

Two campaign cases assigned a larger portion of their online sites to publicizing their executed actions, achievements, and challenges as compared to those of the groups, a trend that can be related to the short-term and issue-specific nature of such cases. Compared to the long term aims of Bidarzani and Safe Home for gradual policy adjustments and building an informed society, the campaigns persuaded specific goals within a limited period of time requiring greater social recognition and acceptance. To this end, aside from providing information about the issues at hand, the campaigners utilized their websites and Facebook pages to publicize on a steady stream basis their strategies and on-the-ground actions.

The Stepdaughter Campaign unit in the ‘Iran Adoption’ website, for example, constantly reported activists’ on-the-ground efforts, such as inquiries from politicians and clerics against the controversial clause. The website also released the minutes of the meeting of the women’s division of Iran’s bar association, held to discuss the consequences of the controversial clause. The Women for Parliament website published two statements to the Iranian people about the campaign’s goals and strategies. As well, it informed the public about the statements that campaigners sent to the Guardian Council in protest to the disqualification of numerous women candidates who had registered to run in the 2016 parliamentary elections. Furthermore, the website was being regularly updated with reports of internal meetings and activists’ visiting with the MPs and officials. The website also published a video during the first days of the campaign that introduced the prominent women’s rights figures co-operating with the campaign. The links to some of such posts on the campaigns’ websites were shared on their Facebook walls.

5.1.2 The Activists have found more opportunity to report officials’ actions

A number of interview statements also illustrate the possibility the Internet has offered activists to broadcast reports of Iranian officials’ inappropriate decisions and actions quickly and without dependence on the press. “Now we have the means to inform people about the wrong decisions. For example, when we witness that a recruitment policy in a public organization is discriminatory, we immediately broadcast it through online media,” said Interviewee 11. Interviewee 9 asserted that “the press power to publish news of officials’ wrong actions is limited, but on the Internet we [always] notify the public.” She went on to declare that “we report their [the officials] actions because we think public opinion can pressure government.” The experiences of two other activists proved this assertion. Interviewees 1 and 8 declared that, in some cases, officials have been forced to act more moderately toward activists because they knew that their actions will be broadcast on online media. Interviewee 1 explained:

The Internet increased the fear of the state about our potential to inform people. We use online media as leverage with the government and the parliament. In our meetings, we always remind them [the officials] that we won’t keep silent and that we will be reflecting our problems in the media.

She narrated two stories about how officials cooperated with her NGO for fear that she, as a very prominent activist, would broadcast the issue on the Internet. To protect the anonymity of this

activist, the details of her experiences cannot be revealed. Interviewee 8 also remembered that the OMS campaign's website continuously published news about the prosecution of the campaign's members by the judiciary: "Because of that, once we had a meeting with an official in the judiciary, he told us to 'Stop writing. Stop spreading the news.' Then he picked up the phone and asked a colleague to follow our request."

Informing people of decision makers' actions was also evident in the observed cases. A significant portion of the news article on the websites and Facebook profiles of the Bidarzani group and Women for Parliament campaign was reports on Iranian officials' discriminatory speech and behaviour, as well as the policy proposals and bills under consideration that would discriminate against women. In addition to such reports, these two cases ran particular initiatives to make transparent officials' deficits and wrongdoings. Women for Parliament launched an initiative to publicly introduce the anti-women MPs in order to prevent them from being reelected. To this end, they created the novel 'Red Cards' system to 'name and shame' those MPs who had taken a stance against gender equality. The campaign issued red cards to 15 MPs, quoting their anti-women speeches and explaining why people should not reelect them in the upcoming parliamentary election.

Biarzani created a specific tab on its website called 'The Statements', informing people about the letters that are issued by the group itself and other women's rights groups to different political figures and organizations. During the observation period, the group published two such statements on its online platforms. The group also incorporated online petitions to these statements so that visitors can sign them as a show of support. Figure 5.1 shows the screen shot of one of these statements. It urges President Rouhani to revise the decision for giving men a higher portion of the 2015 governmental organization's recruitment exam. By the observation time, this statement was signed by 1900 petitioners.



خانه > ویژه > اشتغال > به اعمال تبعیض جنسیتی در اشتغال پایان دهید



در ۲۲ فروردین ۱۳۹۴ در اشتغال، بیانیه‌ها، ویژه و 1226 بازدید

بیش از نصد امضا در اعتراض به اعمال تبعیض جنسیتی در آزمون استخدامی دولت به اعمال تبعیض جنسیتی در اشتغال پایان دهید

بیدارزنی: در اعتراض به تبعیض جنسیتی گسترده در اولین آزمون استخدامی فراگیر دستگاه‌های دولتی در سال ۹۴، جمعی از فعالان حقوق زنان بیانیه‌ی اعتراض آمیزی تهیه کردند که تاکنون به امضای بیش از نصد نفر رسیده است.

بر اساس این آزمون استخدامی که در خردادماه ۹۴ برگزار خواهد شد ۱۳ سازمان دولتی در کشور و ۱۸ اداره در استان خراسان شمالی هفت هزار و ۳۹۳ نفر را استخدام کنند که سهم اختصاصی زنان دو هزار و ۳۹۲ نفر و سهم اختصاصی برای مردان بیش از دوبرابر زنان یعنی چهار هزار و ۴۶۷ نفر در نظر گرفته شده است. برای برخی از مناصب شغلی نیز ترکیبی از زنان و مردان در نظر گرفته شده که مجموع آن، ۵۳۴ نفر است.

این تبعیض گسترده جنسیتی در حالی صورت گرفته که بر اساس گزارش آمار مرکز میزان بیکاری در میان زنان تحصیل کرده دو برابر مردان است.

برای امضای بیانیه به لینک زیر مراجعه کنید:

<http://goo.gl/forms/J2BCEkWWJ7>

Figure 5.1: An open letter to Rouhani's government and a link to its online petition published on Bidarzani website. Retrieved April 27, 2015, from <http://bidarzani.com/21616>. In the public domain.

A finding emerged from the interview analysis should be noted here. Three respondents hold the notion that activists' online sites have not only pressured officials by reporting their actions, they have also moderated the hostile attitudes of many politicians towards women's rights activism and its discourse. These interviewees believed that activists' online sharing of information to the public has affected the attitude of politicians towards the nature and demands of women's rights activists. Interviewee 2, who had direct interaction with politicians due to her journalism career, declared that:

Over the recent years, the Internet has not only affected people's awareness, but also has raised the awareness of the MPs and other parts of the state about our

demands. Even they have become more aware of the problems with the existing legislation.... By reading the contents of our websites, for instance, the description of our objectives, they found out that the activists express natural needs, which are not political and against the principles of the state.... So fortunately, we are now in a situation that the more informed society is pressuring the politicians who themselves have become more aware of Iranian women's demands.

Similarly, Interviewee 10 asserted that one of the greatest impacts of the activist websites is that they illuminate the activism's types of activities to the state: "For instance, they [the officials] read reports of our meetings. They see that we have nothing to hide. Well, this reduces their antagonism toward us." In addition, according to Interviewees 6 and 2, the Internet provides politicians with more insights about the societal demand for greater women's rights. "This information has helped them to apprehend the public opinion toward women's social and political rights," said Interviewee 6. Interviewee 2 emphasized that enhanced awareness about women's demand have even influenced politicians' political behavior. Supporting her statement, she exemplified the rallies of the presidential candidates over recent years:

We witnessed in the last two presidential elections [2009 and 2013] that the candidates offered separate plans for women's affairs. They took their wives with them in their campaign rallies.... Well, they have either accepted that women's demands need to be addressed more seriously, or they are pretending to gain the women's vote. Even if the latter is the case, it is still a good incident. It shows that they know that women are now more aware of their rights.

5.1.3 The activists have gained freedom to expose women's issues beyond cultural taboos

"Women's rights activists always try to break the cultural and religious taboos which cause backwardness and troubles for women," said Interviewee 7. This assertion points at the third opportunity that interviewed activists specifically raised while talking about the advantage of their online media over conventional print media. The interview evidence suggests that over the recent years, the websites and SNSs have played a substantial role in exposing topics which are seldom discussed publicly in Iranian society. Interviewees' experiences and study of the cases from this perspective illustrate that the main taboos activists have been trying to break are around

different aspects of Iranian women's sexual rights. Interviewee 4 explained that before the advent of the Internet, the only way activists could educate women about their sexual rights were through workshops, which she emphasized are still very prevalent. She maintained that the Internet enabled them to provide such education to wider audiences. Later in her interview, she narrated her attempt to raise the question of women's rights for having an abortion by sharing her own story on her Facebook page. Interviewee 10 also remarked that the Internet has provided a space for content about the issues of sexuality, claiming that the spread of such online content and increased public awareness has even made it possible for the mainstream media to cover topics about the female body, although not to a significantly satisfying degree. Her point was also implicit in a testimony by Interviewee 7:

At present, we can see some articles about sexuality on newspapers.... We can see women are more easily talking about their bodies.... It was not like this a couple of years ago. The only source of information about sexual behavior, sexual harassment, and women's sexual subordination was the Internet.... In our website and Facebook [profile], we publish numerous educational materials about women's control over their bodies.

During the observation time, various types of content were shared by the Bidarzani and Safe Home activists about different forms of sexual violence, like sexual harassment at the workplace, sexual assault by family members, and forced pregnancy. Figure 5.2 shows an electronic poster which the Bidarzani group published for the occasion of International Women's Day, defending women's reproduction rights. The displayed text on the image says: "No woman is free unless she is free to decide whether or not she wants to be a mother." The Bidarzani Web site also published a couple of psychological studies on women's sexual behavior and equal rights in sexual relations. These studies were republished by the group's Facebook page.

Among the observed cases, Safe Home seemed to be the one that gained the most benefit of online media for the communication of sexual education to Iranian women. In line with its educational objectives, Safe Home website's training section provided numerous articles, electronic booklets, and audio that were either directed to victims of domestic violence and their families to guide them on the options and resources that are available to them to end the abuse, or addressed the general public in an effort to raise social consciousness towards forms of

domestic violence, in particular sexual violence. For instance, the group published a series of warning signs indicating that a woman or a child has been affected by sexual abuse. The website also published many stories of women suffering from domestic abuses, many of which are based on cases of women who contacted the center for advice. Intriguingly, this group hardly used its Facebook profile to offer such educational materials. For the most part, its Facebook posts were of photos about peace and love in the family, sometimes with inspirational quotes from literatures and famous people.



Figure 5.2: A poster published on the Bidarzani website on International Women's Day about women's reproductive right. Retrieved March 08, 2015, from <http://bidarzani.com/21354>. In the public domain.

Before proceeding to the second theme, an additional finding regarding the first theme should be highlighted. The interviewees focused on the ability of their online platforms to circumvent the restrictions that are imposed on print media by the state and editorial policies of

the press. Observational analysis supplements this finding by suggesting that the Internet has also enabled activists to bypass content presentation constraints in print media. Print media are, by nature, incapable of delivering the wide spectrum of online content containing motion and sound, and interactive elements. The activists who organized the online cases of this research backed up their Facebook statuses by links, videos, and photos. Taking advantage of web 2.0 technologies, the websites of four observed cases delivered different types of content that do not exist on print media: images, videos (clips, animation), podcasts, e-brochures, e-newsletters, slide share presentation, and electronic forms.

5.2 Theme Two: SNSs have facilitated young activists' communication with the Iranian public

This sub-theme suggests that SNSs extend the freedom of communication on the Internet for lower profile young activists. Through these online sites young activists, who are not given enough of a presence in the print media and activist groups' websites, can nevertheless contribute in building public awareness. An underlying assumption behind the testimonies of young interviewees was that high-profile activists have dominance over the analytical discourses on the activist websites. They presented different reasons for this trend. Interviewee 2 asserted that "it is not easy for unknown activists to reflect their independent perspectives on the groups' websites because the women's rights groups consider strict policies for their websites." She believed this can be related to the fact that websites are the groups' formal public platform. "Therefore, they spread opinions that are consistent with their collective viewpoint." Her statement underlines a statement expressed by a leading activist, Interviewee 9: "The websites represent various women groups' collective visions, their social and political ideologies, and their approaches in addressing problems." Interviewee 6 claimed the priority given to the articles of big name activists on the press and websites is due to the fact that they receive more public attention and coverage. Interviewee 5, however, believed that the hegemony of high-profile activists on women's websites is shaped not only by their names, but also by their skills of formal media activities:

Interviewee 5: "Take a look at the [activist] websites. It is obvious that the experienced and well-known activists have more presence.... Well, I think that is because they know how to write their ideas, how to meet the editorial guidelines of the websites"

The researcher: “So you think less presence of inexperienced activists on these websites is because they cannot meet the editorial requirements?”

Interviewee 5: “Well, yes. That is part of the story. Many of us [young activists] cannot expand our views into an analytical article. We might have an interpretation about an event, but it is not easy to present it as a piece of writing for a website. We should admit that writing formal articles on Web sites needs special media skills.”

To examine respondents’ assertion about the hegemony of high-profile women’s rights activists’ viewpoints on the websites, the researcher listed authors of opinion articles on the observed websites. The result confirmed that the young activists had considerably less contribution in comparison to the big-name activists. Bidarzani and Safe Home had a noticeable trend in the reflection of the ideas of world activists and academicians. Thus, translated articles made the largest portion of opinion articles on these websites. With regards to opinion articles written by Iranian activists on the websites of these groups, as well as those of campaign cases, the largest numbers of authors were the known faces of women’s rights movement, ones who had several years of activism experience. During the observation period, some of these prominent activists had multiple articles on the Bidarzani and Safe Home websites.

At numerous points during the interviews, the younger respondents in particular spoke of the SNSs as the desired platform for inexperienced young activists to express their personal viewpoints and garner their own audiences. Their experiences reveal that the advent of SNSs in Iran has decentralized the activists’ public communication, giving more opportunities to low-profile activists to participate in building public opinion. Interviewee 3 said websites do not have the capacity for the participation of all activists, particularly unknown ones. Speaking of the growth of SNSs, he said “now Iranian social media users are exposed to the diversified opinions of not only prominent activists, but also unknown activists.” Interviewee 6 recalled:

We were young and inexperienced activists who were hidden behind big names.... For me, Facebook was the beginning of my speaking with my people.... When I started using Facebook and later Google Plus, I explored my ability in attracting people.... I understood that my ideas were interesting to many people. I could have never brought up these ideas so straightly.

Aside from the autonomy that younger activists have gained on SNSs to post what they like to express, the informality and simplicity of communication over these sites was also treasured. Based on the principle of User Generated Content, these online technologies allow for writing in a more informal language in comparison with conventional websites. Against the difficulties of writing on formal websites of activist groups, Interviewee 5 acknowledged the “informal and simple” communication channel that SNS status updates provide for inexperienced young activists: “I do believe that these networks [SNSs] assisted many of the activists who did not have proper media skills, to express their thoughts. Facebook gave them the opportunity to write their views in just a few lines.” Her assertion is underlined by Interviewee’s 4 experience. When she created her Facebook and Twitter profiles, she found her own audience: “With them, I could share my personal viewpoint in simple words, for instance on the negative and positive sides of a piece of legislation”.

The observational analysis revealed that while campaigns’ collective Facebook profiles were used in a very similar way to their associated websites for the publication of communal standpoints, the observed individual Facebook profiles of Activists A, B, C, D were primarily and substantially used to expose their personal views about the campaigns’ issues. The personal views of the big name activists – Activists B and D - were mostly echoes of their published articles, which were sometimes attached by the articles’ links on the women’s groups’ or press websites. For these activists, Facebook seemed to serve as an additional online platform to increase the coverage of their previously published arguments. This while the lower profile activists – Activists A and C - used their Facebook statuses as the primary place to disclose their personal opinions.

5.3 Theme Three: The activist online sites have created a two-way communication between activists and the public

The previous themes uncovered that online communication has amplified activists’ voices in Iranian society. This theme explains that the Internet has also created a communication channel for the activists to receive a public voice in return. For the majority of the respondents, such two-way communication between women’s rights activists and the public was particularly a product of SNSs. Interviewee 10 noted that: “Before the [use of] the Internet, our communication with society was mostly one-way. Through social networks, we have been enabled to hear the voice of our audience.” Interviewee 3 remembered the aftermath of the 2009 presidential election and

said: “In the situations where the activists had lost their real [offline] communication channels, [online] social networks were the main channel to access public opinion.”³⁹ Interviewee 4 explained that SNSs enabled her to observe people’s reactions to her ideas and activities. She noted “I choose what I want to post very carefully because I want to see its impact on my followers.” Interviewee 2 recounted:

I do care for the opinions of my online audiences, particularly when we cannot speak with people regularly.... How does society perceive our activities? What is their stand on the government’s decisions? The comments we receive on [online] social networks give us a sense about questions as such.

There is a variety of technical features that SNSs provide for users to interact with posts. These sites offer their visitors commentary features, mainly likes, shares, comments, and replies to comments; and the possibility for private messaging, mainly real-time chat and private messages. Interviewee 5, for instance, focused on Facebook commentary features: “Contrary to the weblogs and websites, people can see the comments next to the posts. So they are unintentionally exposed to the previous comments.... Seeing the previous comments provokes them to participate in the discussion.” However, for the activists interviewed in this study, such technological possibilities appeared as a subordinate cause of the two-way communication on SNSs. It was more often expressed that the willingness of the readers to openly share their opinions and experiences with the activists is associated with the informal nature of communication on SNSs.

A set of experiences suggests that the informality of SNSs allows activists to share information about their private lives. When audiences are exposed to activists’ personal lives, they are encouraged to share their own experiences and observations in return. Interviewee 9 noted that the information she has shared through her social media profiles has created a more accurate portrayal of her life behind the stereotypical image of a feminist woman:

A woman who does not like to get married, who hates having children, who is against religion, who thinks that all women are living in pain and suffering.... My image on my pages [social networking profiles] shows that these are not true. I am married. I got divorced not because I hate men but because I made a wrong

39 It will be discussed in the next theme that his acknowledgement of this opportunity was accompanied by his skepticism to use the term ‘public’ to refer to SNSs’ users in Iran.

decision. I raised my child with love and I am a true believer in Islam because it promotes men and women's equality. I acknowledge women's breakthroughs and happiness as much as I fight for their unachieved rights. When I make a true picture of myself, I may lose those who have a problem with the way I live, but I make a real and long relationship with the rest of my readers.

From her perspective, this "truthful" relationship has encouraged her followers to engage with her posts and share their own problems. "They know who they are talking to. They understand that I can make sense of their problems because I am an ordinary woman like them," she noted. Talking about activists' self-disclosure on their social networking profiles, Interviewee 6 also asserted: "People feel closer when they watch each others' photos and read each others' memos." He used the term 'sense of intimacy' to note that: "many activists have consciously or unconsciously created this sense of intimacy for their followers by sharing information about their private lives." This sense can be the key to justifying the willingness of Interviewee 4's audiences to disclose their private experiences and views. Interviewee 4 explained how the testimony of her personal experience of abortion sparked an intense conversation among her followers:

A year ago, I wrote about my abortion story on Facebook. I explained the difficulties I had in terms of the costs and the location of the abortion. I did not expect such a reaction. I had about 1000 followers at that time. This post was shared 120 times and received about 90 comments. Some of them shared their own abortion stories, and explained that they had the same problems as mine... Some of them talked about their decisions to continue with their unplanned pregnancy. And many of them argued why they were for or against restriction of abortion services [by the state]... I remember there was a woman who narrated the reaction of her friends and her family when they found out about her abortion and said we could not change the laws so long as abortion without medical reasons is considered a sin in our culture and religion.

By letting her readers know about her personal story, Interviewee 4 made them feel that they were in a close relationship with her. A lack of this kind of interpersonal relationship between the Facebook profile of the Safe Home group and its followers can explain readers' reluctance to

write about their private incidents willingly and openly. As explained in Chapter 4, one of the objectives of the group is to educate people and make them aware of the forms of domestic violence. In one post on the Facebook profile, the admin shared stories of victims to explain instances of domestic violence, asking users if they had ever been faced with the same behavior. The observation of the comment section identified only one comment which reflected a personal experience: “My mother does not have a good relationship with me. I was even alone during my pregnancy and delivery.” The negligible number of comments which conveyed a personal experience is particularly noticeable considering three facts. First, this group’s Facebook profile possessed the largest network of followers compared with other observed individual and collective profiles (about 110 k). Second, there were many followers who did not use their full names, therefore were able to express their experiences or observations without revealing their identities. And lastly, the stories that were shared by the page administrator were about the range of abusive behaviors. Neither those which exemplified extreme cases such as sexual abuse, nor the more regular cases, such as emotional or economic abuse, were replied to in the form of real experiences.

The observational analysis also revealed a disparity in the dialogic outcome of the individual and collective Facebook profiles. Compared with the four individual profiles, the groups’ and campaigns’ Facebook profiles were not successful in establishing enough of a relationship with their visitors to lead them to conversation. The greatest portion of comments to collective profiles’ posts was written by one-time visitors directed to the main posts. This while the majority of comments to the Facebook posts of the four individual profiles were the exchange of views between activists and their new and returning commentators. A more in-depth observation of the comments suggests that this disparity can stem from the level at which administrators respond to visitors’ comments. Compared to collective profile administrators, individual activists responded to comments more frequently. Apparently, their engagement in dialogue with such commentators heated up and extended the conversations.

Considering the limited dialogic feature of Web sites compared to SNSs, it is no wonder that the majority of interview testimonies about bilateral form of communication with audiences concentrated on SNSs. Nevertheless, two interviewees remarked on the possibility to receive and reply to visitors’ inquiries and feedback through the websites. Interviewees 1 and 7, the NGO managers, pointed at the e-mail contacts on their NGO’s websites connecting members with

people seeking help and the general interested public. The observation also showed that the groups and campaigns made efforts to get involved in a two-way relationship with their readers by incorporating comment forms into the posts, and e-mail contact information into their websites. A notable use of e-mail contacts was observed in the Women for Parliament case. The campaign asked its website audience to e-mail their photos with the campaign logo as a show of support. The best shots were then published on the campaign's website and Facebook profile. In addition to the aforementioned interactive features, the Safe Home Web site provided distressed women not wishing to use the group's hotline with online forms enabling them to book online consulting sessions. In these forms, those seeking help were asked to indicate their problems and preferred time and manner with which they wish to be contacted, including a wide range of real time chat services. Using live online chat, visitors could put their questions to counselors and receive free personal and confidential replies.

So far, this chapter has revealed that women's rights activism has benefited from the deployment of its online media. It has gained the possibility of disseminating information which cannot pass press restrictions; gotten the young and low-profile activists involved in the process of building public awareness; and it has engaged in two-way communication with Iranian public. The next themes, however, disclose that the Internet impacts on the activism-public communication have not been entirely constructive. They will expose concerns regarding two drawbacks the activism has experienced by communicating with people through online media.

5.4 Theme Four: The quality of the activism's discussions has been undermined on SNSs

This theme reflects a serious concern among interviewees that SNSs undermine the quality of the activism's discussions by allowing everyone to be the producer of information - the same feature which was acknowledged as the facilitator of younger activists' participation in public communication practices. Interviewee 5 seemed to be very conscious about this dual impact of SNSs. As shown in Theme 2, she praised the simplicity of status updating on these online sites for young activists to expose their personal views. But later she noted that, unlike many young activists, she herself is reluctant to present her views on her Facebook profile, as she thinks "such short and brief presentation makes my viewpoints look superficial." When the researcher asked her for more explanation, she replied: "When you present your views without discussing all its aspects, you are risking the influence of your debates. You evoke emotions of your followers but give them a superficial knowledge of the cause." Interviewee 7 raised a similar argument, noting

that on social media “the audiences receive a huge amount of information, but we should really ask ourselves how rich this information is.” He asserted that the few-line discussions raised by SNSs are not comparable with activists’ articles in terms of “their analytical value.” Interviewee 10 went further, suggesting that public communication through SNSs will bring about a ‘lack of theoretical support’ for women’s rights activism:

The wideness of debate subjects on Facebook has affected the quality of discourse in this network [SNS]. Facebook is like an ocean with one meter depth. Over the recent years, we have not seen a serious and long-living argument emerging from these places.... I think in the long-term these networks [SNSs] will cause a lack of theoretical support for the activism.

In addition to the depth of the discourse, the term ‘quality’ in this theme also refers to interviewees’ concerns about the information credibility on SNSs⁴⁰. It should be noted that the interviewee’s testimonies with regards to this concern were directed towards individuals’, and not the groups’, usage of SNSs. Interviewee 4, who had the experience of managing two activist websites, compared the credibility of content on websites with individual activists’ Facebook profiles: “If an activist wants to publish news on the websites, she or the websites’ editors will cross check the news validity through multiple sources.” She noted that this has rarely been the case with activists’ social networking profiles:

They can share information within a few seconds with no need to gain their teams’ approval.... Sometimes, my friends make statements that are derived from their emotions, not real evidence. I think, as activists, we should give more thoughts to what we share because our debates receive more attention than an ordinary [social media] user.

Likewise, Interviewee 11 declared her criticism toward some “groundless” discourses on SNSs by maintaining that “like any other social phenomenon identification of women’s problems requires empirical studies. Also, the realization of the best treatments would require sociological methods.” She claimed that as part of the educated class of society, women’s rights activists have

40 Chapter 7 shows that the same concern restricts print media journalists’ use of activists’ social networking profiles as an information source.

been always trying to look at the women's problems scientifically. She warned that this constructive trend is being threatened by the deployment of SNSs:

For example, we can see many posts on Facebook suggesting that the Maternity Leave Law⁴¹ will shrink women's employment rate. My question for them is what is your evidence? Which part of the labor market are you talking about? Women in public organizations or private companies? We should not assert general and groundless views toward the sensitive women's issues.

Observational analysis proved that interviewees' concern about the quality of information on SNSs is not unfounded. However, the evidence of groundless information did not exist in all four observed individual Facebook profiles. On the one hand, the observation identified status updates presenting inaccurate or ambivalent information about the issues at hand. On the other hand, there were examples of posts that contained objective argumentation and reasoning. The posts that can best represent both groups were updated by individual activists involved in the Stepdaughter campaign.

As explained in Chapter 4, the issue that this campaign tried to address was legally technical and complicated. A brief and unsupported status update by Activist A seemed to create more of a buzz about the legislation. This was particularly evident through the comments to this post. In a status, Activist A expressed her objection to the 'family protection law', and in particular the controversial stepdaughter marriage clause:

The parliament has passed the Child and Adolescent Protection Bill and has sent it to the Guardian Council for the final approval. Two articles of the bill are too dangerous for a stepchild and they should be challenged before it's too late. The first one is Article 27 stating that marriage of the legal parent with the stepdaughter will be legal upon the approval of the court either during child custody or afterwards (such marriage has been illegal and it is now being legalized). And the second one is Article 22 that says it must be mentioned in the

41 She refers to the controversy over the law which was ultimately passed by the Parliament in 2015. The law extends the period of maternity leave for three months to make it nine months.

kids' birth certificate/ID that they were adopted; this will create pressure on them all through the child's life.

While this post says that the clause is legalizing the previously illegal marriage, the researcher's investigation shows that this activist either misinterpreted or misrepresented the reality; for, prior to this clause, there was no law or any type of law enforcement prohibiting this type of marriage. This mistake was also noticed by her commenters. From 44 users who left comments, five expressed their confusion in making sense of the situation, and 14 readers accused her of being biased. The quotes that follow are examples of such comments:

Amir: Sorry, but I think it is a bit confusing, I have heard that this marriage was not abandoned in the first place and now the parliament is trying to restrict it.

Ali: Such a marriage is shameless. But do you know why such a bill has been sent for ratification? I think we should know the details before assaulting the MPs.

Safa: Unfortunately, your information is not precise. There was no law about this marriage before. This is the story: the parliamentarian voted to make it completely illegal. They, however, were faced with the Guardian Council's objection, arguing that as a stepdaughter is not a blood child the law could not make it completely illegal. Therefore, they made it illegal except with the family court approval and stepdaughter consent.

Hossein: We don't expect an active woman like you to make such mistakes. For your information, this kind of marriage was not illegal. There was no law about it and there were some ill and maniac men who abused this legal gap.

Interestingly, one reader invited the activist to also talk about the positive aspects of the law:

Sheil: I think you should also talk about the advancement in the law. The new law gives single women over thirty the right to adopt a child. I think this is a great breakthrough for women.... I cannot wait to reach thirty.

While the statement by Activist A was subjective, Activist B demonstrated more of an effort in providing back-up for her words, which can be related to her higher level of experience and proficiency. In one of her Facebook posts, she provided her audiences with the summary of an article she had published describing why the negative consequences of the bill outweigh its

positive aspects. In this article, she presented the main arguments put forward by the proponent of the bill, then drew upon legal and physiological principles to justify her position. Also, to respond to most of the questions and views left for this post, this activist used links to articles and interviews with experts in the field in newspapers and other websites, as well as to legal documents in governmental portals, and Facebook posts by lawyer-cum-activists supporting the validity of her claim. A reader, for instance, questioned her information by asking: “You said the court might approve the request in exceptional cases. I think it is impossible because a man cannot have her stepdaughter’s name on his identity documents and at the same time officially marry her,” to which Activist B responded:

Well, you are right; you cannot have your stepdaughter’s custody and marry her. That is why it is said in the bill that if the family court approves the marriage in the exceptional case, it should first invalidate the custody. Please refer to article 27 of the proposed bill.

What is noticed from these mentioned comments is the knowledge of readers and their ability to challenge activists on their positions. Of those interviewed, Interviewee 9 remarked that the Internet has increased the searching ability of people, requiring activists to make more efforts to validate what they share on the Internet. She noted: “I do my best to present precise information of incidents because I know that my readers receive this information from multiple sources. I do not want to appear partial to my readers.”

5.5 Theme Five: Activists’ online media has limited their access to specific groups of the public

The interview analysis signified a strong notion that Internet access and usage inequalities narrow down the activists’ access to portions of the public that the Iranian Internet space over-represents. Besides the geographical digital divide⁴², interviewees were concerned about Internet usage inequalities and different online behavior within social segments of the society.

42 The 2017 ICT Development Index (IDI) for Iran’s provinces showed Tehran scored 2.26 points above the national average, while the least developed province, the southeastern Sistan-Baluchestan, scored 2.4 point below average (Iran’s ministry of ICT, 2017). The IDI is a standard tool to measure the digital divide and differences within and across countries in terms of their levels of ICT development (ITU, 2017).

Interviewee 11 noted, while she was talking about the possibilities that the Internet gives activists in affecting public opinion:

...[H]owever, a considerable number of women who we cannot access on the ground are also deprived from accessing the Internet. Even though they can find access to the net, they don't know how to use it, particularly the housewives. We sometimes ignore this basic problem.

Interviewee 7 asserted that activists cannot rely on the Internet for distribution of information about all topics because sometimes the target group does not use the Internet as its source of information. He exemplified working class women: "On the Internet, we cannot educate women who work in factories about their rights. Either they don't have an Internet connection; or they don't have the ability and the time to use." Due to this weakness of the Internet, he believed that the Internet in Iran is not a public medium in comparison with traditional media, particularly Iran's national broadcaster. "The influence of TV shows or series is far more than our sites. People from all classes of the society can watch them; even those in the remotest areas of the country where we can only have physical access." He then narrated a personal experience:

Last year, a TV producer asked us to convince one of those asking for our help to participate in his show and talk about her life. One of the ladies accepted to appear on the show with her children. The impact was huge. After the show went on air, we were called by many women who said they required our assistance. We have been publishing stories of these women on our [online] sites, but we had never experienced such a reaction. Thus, apparently, we had not reached enough of the population through our electronic channels.

Interviewee 3 elaborated on this subject more than the other respondents. He said "some activists feel that on SNSs, they have access to all parts of the real society". He called this feeling an illusion, believing "it is caused by the multiplicity of characteristics and perspectives in our followers' networks. But we should really ask ourselves how many people are connected to the net?" In addition to the usage gap, he noted that people with the same level of Internet access and usage ability do not have similar online behaviors. "Those who have access, how do they use it

[the Internet]? How much time per day? For what purposes do they use it?" He believed that Iranian people's behavior in the online realm is very much diverse:

We cannot analyze the extent to which our online discourses have entered the society because we don't know which society we are talking about. We are not dealing with a homogenous society. Even in Tehran, [people in] the west and the east have different lifestyles. Both have Internet connection and the ability to use it. But they use it differently because they care about different issues. If you share a political post [on SNSs] you might receive ten likes by one and a hundred by the other. The situation would reverse if you share an entertainment post.

The other assertion raised by this interviewee and two others was that on SNSs societal groups do not find equal opportunities to contribute to socio-political discussions. Interviewee 3 said what he could perceive on these online sites was "a kind of centralization of discourses around the issues of the urban middle class and elimination of the voice of marginalized groups." From his perspective, social media in Iran has not only alleviated, but also reproduced, the existing exclusion of particular social groups such as ethnic minorities, rural, and lower classes:

Why don't the issues of the Kurdish minority get the same attention as the issues about Tehran and big cities? If a user from a small city or village writes about his issues, will he receive the same public attention? No! So, it is not all about the digital divide. This means that even when these groups enter [online] social networks, their voices are shut down.... Users in these networks [SNSs] have built their own mainstream and don't give a place to other voices. This exclusion exists in the society and magnifies on the Internet.

Interviewees 10 and 5 were also mindful of this exclusion. When phrasing her objection to activists who have limited their public communication to online spaces, Interviewee 10 asserted: "Instead of talking with people who could not find a place in this [online] space, we flee to this [online] space where we can hear the voice of users who just echo what they have in common." Interviewee 5 referred to this exclusion by calling it 'the classification of social demands'. She noted: "If I was a working class woman who lived in Pakdasht [a small town near Tehran], could

I find the confidence to write about my troubles on these networks [SNSs], where I could hardly find issues of my social class? No!”

Interviewees 10 and 5 also suggested that the inequalities in retrieving and sharing online information are intensified when people need to use anti-filtering technologies to get access to a great number of activist websites and prominent social networking profiles. In line with their statement, the observation showed that among the four online cases, access to the websites of Bidarzani and Safe Home was blocked by Iran’s filtering committee. This while Facebook, as the most followed SNS of the cases, has been blocked since 2009. Interviewee 10 said: “We are well aware that many women, particularly older ladies and housewives, cannot circumvent the filters on our websites because they are not familiar with anti-filtering tools.” Interviewee 5 asserted:

In Iran, people need a higher level of digital skills, because the full access to the Internet requires the ability to work with anti-filters. For us who have enough computer knowledge, this is not a big deal. But we should notice that we cannot expect women in remote cities to know about anti-filtering technologies.

At various points during the interviews, the respondents raised their concern about the disparity in the digital lives of middle- and lower-class women. In addition to the abovementioned discussions, the subsequent data analysis chapter presents interviewees’ testimonies about activists’ internal arguments that have emerged from the realization of such a disparity and marginalization of the voice of the lower-class in Iranian cyberspace. Notably, a number of interviewed journalists raised this inequality as one of the reasons for their reluctance to rely on the Internet as their primary information source.

5.6 Discussion

This chapter has been responsive to the first research question. It projected the benefits and pitfalls of activists’ online media for their public communication. It revealed that Iranian women’s rights activism’s public communication has been enhanced by the deployment of websites and SNSs through three major opportunities. First, use of these online sites enabled activists to disseminate information that could not pass print media filters. Second, it enabled young and lower-profile activists to expose their viewpoints to the public. Third, SNSs and, to a lower degree, websites enforced bilateral communication between activists and their audience. The empirical evidence about these opportunities support a number of extant studies, presented

in the theoretical chapter, while dismissing others in relation to the Iranian case (see Chapter 3, Section 3.1.1).

This chapter illuminated that for women's rights activism, the increased ability to reach out to the public is hardly the result of the Internet's capability to compress time and space barriers (Ayres, 1999; Breindl, 2010; Deibert, 2000) and lower cost of communication (Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2014; Coombs, 1998; Kim et al., 2014; Obar et al., 2012). It is, to the largest extent, the outcome of the control the activists have gained over the content of their public messages (Bennet, 2003; Breindl, 2010; Coombs, 1998; Harp et al., 2012; Micóá & Ripollés, 2014; Myers, 2000).

The increased control over the dissemination of activism information is, above all, in respect to the effectiveness of activist websites and social networking profiles in circumventing Iranian press restrictions. Those studies in the Western context largely focused on the ability of the Internet to bypass editorial filters of mass media and elimination of news production intermediaries (Bennet, 2003; Breindl, 2010; Coombs, 1998; Myers, 2000). This study in the Iranian context signifies that the Internet assists activists in avoiding the editorial constraints escalated by state-imposed restrictions on the press. As well, it has served as alternative media to blocked offline publications.

This chapter depicts that the activist groups and individuals have exploited this opportunity to spread knowledge of gender-related issues they want to address, as well to bring to light their vision, identities, and actions. The latter mode of Internet utilization by Iran's women's rights activists conforms to scholars' discussion of the Internet embracement for act of 'self-presentation', which raises activists' public visibility and transparency (Cammaerts, 2012; Porta & Mosca, 2009; Pudrovska & Ferree, 2004). The interview analysis also suggests that activist groups' self-presentation on their online spaces can encourage the country's politicians to have second thoughts about their hostile attitudes toward women's rights activists. The officials are also more likely to act "in a manner consistent with citizen concerns" (Garret 2006, p. 209) through the experience of their negative actions being broadcasted by women's rights activists' independent online media. The interviewees' experiences in this study provide empirical evidence to the notion that more information available to the public results in more political accountability (Garret, 2006) on the part of governments. The value of activists' online

information in this regard is magnified in Iranian society, where controlled media system filters the flow of political news.

While it has substantially bypassed the press limitations, the Internet itself has not remained unaffected by the hardliner's media control policies. The observational analysis and the context study of Chapter 2 show that the Internet censorship and filtering policies of the state have been extended to women's rights activists' online spaces. While women's websites have been the subject of regular disruptions by the state, intriguingly, only two interviewed activists stressed this challenge. Their testimonies, which were presented in the final theme, referred to Internet filtering not as an obstacle for activists, but rather as a challenge for people who have difficulties in using anti-filtering technologies. The insignificance of this problem for the respondents can be related to the fact that the Internet filtering in Iran is becoming ineffective due to the advancement and prevalence of anti-filtering technologies among Iranians⁴³. Also in this study, scholars' fear that the Internet enables the Iranian government to track down challengers (e.g. Baldino & Goold, 2014; Michaelsen, 2011; Morozov, 2011) remains unfulfilled. Extant studies have reported this challenge mainly as the result of Iranian protesters' use of social media to organize mass action, particularly following the 2009 presidential election. Although the interviewed women's rights activists put great emphasis on the challenge of state monitoring their activities, they did not emphasize their own online activities facilitating state monitoring. This can be explained by the fact that women's rights activists organize through private communication channels, mainly e-mail groups.

Chapter 3 represented two studies that argued the potential of online activism to undermine control of elites on news production (Breindl, 2010; Micó & Ripollés, 2014). The argument by these studies can be adapted to the case of this research in the sense that SNSs open up possibilities for low-profile young activists in bypassing the hegemony of high-profile activists over the production and dissemination of the activism discourse. However, these studies focussed merely on the dominance of elites in mass media. This while, besides Iranian print media, as the interview and observational analyses indicated, activist websites are also over-represented by big name women's rights activists. Thus, the case of this study shows that the

⁴³ The latest published national survey shows that 69.3 percent of the Iranian youth use VPNs to bypass Internet filtering (Iran Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2014)

editorial guidelines of activist groups' websites can reproduce the hegemony that big name activists practice in offline media. In this situation, by providing individual activists with independent communication channels, SNSs facilitate what Micóa and Ripollés called a "move toward decentralization" (2014, p. 863) of activism information production.

The findings from younger activists' testimonies and observation of individual Facebook profiles expand the study by Kim et al. (2014) arguing that SNSs' pre-defined features require less expertise to set up a public communication channel. In addition to these features, the informal nature of communication on these sites enables women's rights activists who do not have enough media skills to express their viewpoints plainly and shortly. This chapter showed that this informality also contributes to the establishment of two-way communication between individual activists and their audiences.

The private and informal communication channel that SNSs offer allows women's rights activists to expose details of their personal lives and experiences to their audiences. It was illustrated by Theme 3 that this personal information creates a sense of intimacy and interpersonal relationship between individual activists and their visitors, which ultimately motivates the same visitors to share their personal issues on activists' pages as well. Therefore, while this study assumes that dialogic communication creates interpersonal relations with online audiences (Taylor et al., 2001), it also suggests that it can be the other way around too. For cases such as women's rights activism, which cares about taking private issues and transforming them into public concern, the trust and closeness that exist in interpersonal relationships are effective in motivating audiences to engage in dialogue with activists. The lack of this factor can be added to the reasons that public relations studies have put forward explaining the failure of non-profit organization in utilizing the dialogic capabilities of the Internet.

Theme three also showed that individuals and groups differ in the level at which they heat up and extend conversations through engagement with their followers' comments. The observational evidence indicated that the higher engagement of the individual activists encouraged more and longer dialogic loops on their Facebook profiles. This result reinforces scholars' concern about the necessity of commitment in providing timely responses to visitors' comments (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009). Both lines of reasoning presented by public relation scholars can be applied in explaining women's rights groups' and campaigns' lower level of engagement with readers' comments. Particularly for the campaign, constraints of

time and resources can prevent them from consistent maintenance of their profiles - the problem raised by Kim et.al (2014) and Bortree & Seltzer (2009). However, one can give a greater degree of importance to the fact that Iranian women's rights groups' objective in creating SNSs' accounts is, above all, to support their websites' top-down information distribution function, rather than engaging in dialogue with visitors. As Waters and Jamal (2011, p. 321) explained, they tend to "use one-way models despite the potential for dialogue and community building on the social networking site."

Existing literature have argued for the negative effects of the lower cost and barriers for information dissemination on the value of activists' information (Ayres, 1999; Garret, 2006; Surman & Reilly, 2003). The main points of concern for these studies are the availability of unreliable information and the difficulties to differentiate it from accurate information. The evidence presented in this chapter demonstrates that Iranian activism is no exception to this concern. The absence of editorial constraints on SNSs, as the individual activists' proprietary communication platform, may undermine the credibility of women's rights-related online information. However, the devaluation of the activism information on these sites not only arises from the diffusion of unreliable information but can also be the result of a superficial presentation of activists' perspectives. Informal and short posts distributed via activists' social networking profiles have less 'analytical value' (Interviewee 7) compared to activists' articles in the traditional press and websites. Therefore, this study suggests that the possibility for informal communication on SNSs can be a double-edged sword for activists' public communication. On the one hand, it can facilitate the communication of younger and lower profile activists with society and encourage audiences to engage in dialogue with activists. On the other hand, it may lessen the depth and analytical aspects of activism's discourses.

The final interview theme depicted the other peril that threatens, above all, those women's rights activists overwhelmed by the benefits of online communication. The Internet limits activists' access to audiences who do not truly represent the totality of Iranian society due to the problems of Internet access and usage inequality in the country. The factors which, according to the literature, affect the access of societies to activists' information appear to be related to the Iranian context: Internet control (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2008; Garret, 2006; Rod & Weidmann, 2015), the digital divide, and media literacy (Breindl, 2010; Coombs, 1998; Harlow & Harp, 2012; Surman & Reilly, 2003). This chapter suggests that the Internet inequality in Iranian

society is not limited to these widely discussed problems. The interviewed activists raised the concern that social media users in Iran belittle the voice of marginalized groups in favor of the mostly urban middle class. The complete validation of this assertion would require a separate study on the Iranian online society. However, by also considering the realities of the digital divide in the country, concerns are being raised over the fact that activists' over-reliance on online communication can reinforce the existing societal gap among Iranian women by giving some groups more opportunity to receive the education that the activism offers online, and in making their issues salient.

CHAPTER 6

WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVISM ON THE NET: THE IMPACTS ON ACTIVISTS' INTERNAL RELATIONS

One of the central questions prompting this research was in knowing how the internal relations of Iranian women's rights activists have changed through utilization of the Internet. In an attempt to shed light on this question, this chapter uncovers the major impacts of the Internet on the activism network via four overarching interview themes. The previous chapter showed that most of the impacts on the activism-public communication have emerged from the utilization of both SNSs and websites, with only two sub-themes referring to SNSs specifically. In this chapter, however, it is demonstrated that the interviewed activists more strictly differentiated between the impacts of online technologies, e-mail groups, websites, and SNSs.

The first theme contains the findings about the promises of e-mail groups for the activist groups' collective decision-making. As remarked in Chapter 5, the interview analysis demonstrates that e-mail groups are the key online mediums used for activists' internal communication. The groups and individuals within the women's rights movement have exploited this Internet technology for the exchange of ideas, decision-making, and coordinating actions. The first interview theme is embedded with no observational analysis. The limitation that prevented the researcher from observing the private e-mail groups was highlighted in Chapter 4. The second theme elaborates on how both activist websites and e-mail groups facilitate collaboration among various women's rights' groups. The interview and observational analysis produced no evidence of activist website involvement in the coordination of joint actions. However, websites do influence the groups' interactivity by familiarizing them with each other's visions and actions, and through exhibiting their solidarity. This Internet technology is also utilized for the exchange of knowledge within the activists' network. The third theme depicts this opportunity and discusses how the content disseminated through the groups' websites theoretically while also practically empowering the individual activists constituting the women's rights movement. The fourth theme discusses how individual activists' usage of SNSs as a personal public communication channel raises tensions within the activism network. It should be highlighted that the interview and observational data provided no evidence to support the utilization of SNSs for activists' internal communication and organization. The activists' interactions within these online sites are limited to the exchange of ideas in the comment

sections. Similar to the previous empirical chapter, the final section outlines the key findings and evaluates the applicability of pre-existing discussions, first presented in Chapter 3 (Section 3.1.3), to this Iranian case.

6.1 Theme One: E-mail groups have facilitated collective decision-making

According to the interviewees, e-mail group technology was first utilized by women's rights activists during the One Million Signature Campaign, launched in August 2006 (see Section 2.2.6 in Chapter 2). Three interviewees who were members of this well-known campaign recalled that the campaign's e-mail groups gave them their first experience of online communication with other activists. For instance, Interviewee 2 explained:

In the [OMS] campaign, information was only communicated via e-mail groups. This was the leading activists' decision.... At that time, many activists, including myself, had not enough knowledge of working with a computer, let alone the Internet.... We started to learn because we had to join e-mail groups to be aware of discussions, news, and events.

At the time of the interviews, 10 interviewees were members of one or multiple e-mail groups, while one was a former member of these online groups. What is important to note here is that no interviewee had used or formed a public e-mail group to raise women's issues, signifying the activists' reluctance to deploy this online technology as a public communication medium.

The great majority of interviewees expressed that e-mail and, in particular, e-mail groups are their first and foremost tool for expressing and exchanging views to achieve common perspectives on various aspects of their activism. Interviewee 5 said that over the recent years a large number of decisions related to their activism have been made within these virtual groups. She recalled the process of discussing media policies to gain public awareness towards a family related piece of legislation. "Through our e-mails, we were talking about the best newspapers and journalists to contact and the main points we should raise." "In some cases we exchanged over 200 e-mails," Interviewee 4 said. She exemplified a heated debate amongst activists in the e-mail group of a women's rights NGO about the effectiveness of their past activities. Interviewee 9 evidenced the cases of e-mail communication among high-profile activists over the wording of their statements. Interviewee 2 explained the story of the Simone de Beauvoir award,

which was given to a women's campaign in Iran. It provides the clearest example of the e-mail groups' function as a venue for collective decision-making:

It was mentioned in the campaign statement that no financial assistance should be received from any governmental or non-governmental organization.... Whether or not we should accept the award was opened to discussion in the campaign's e-mail list.... It was about EUR 800, if I remember correctly.... It became a heated topic. About 500 e-mails were exchanged among the two sides of the debate. Finally, we decided not to accept the award.

Focussing on the activists' use of e-mail groups for dialogue and decision-making, the following sub-themes uncover that e-mail groups have enabled more Iranian women's rights activists to exert influence on their groups' decision outcomes by circumventing two restrictions that had previously undermined the groups' collective decision-making processes: (a) geographical barriers, and (b) the financial and security costs of offline meetings.

6.1.1 Bypassing geographic barriers

A very recurrent statement in the interviews was that e-mail groups give activists the ability to participate in groups discussions without being confined to their geographical locations. "E-mail groups make decision-making more democratic because the activists who live in other cities and cannot attend meetings in Tehran have found the opportunity to take part in the debates," said Interviewee 2. The importance of this participation for women's rights activism was illustrated by Interviewee 10:

For NGOs and campaigns, it is always critical to have the contribution of women's rights activists in smaller cities. This is because the demands of Iranian women include a wide spectrum of issues. The only way to identify and address the issues of different cities and minorities is through local activists.

This interviewee explained that prior to the usage of e-mail groups, face-to-face meetings were a major venue for activists' internal deliberation. For this reason, the women's rights activists in the capital were, to a large extent, prevented from contacting local activists from other parts of the country, a source of dissatisfaction with the latter group: "They believed that activists in Tehran were not aware of their particular difficulties and concerns." She emphasized that e-mail

groups significantly addressed this communication gap, paving the way for participation of dispersed activists in the debates. Interviewee 8 clarified this opportunity by exemplifying the e-mail groups that were founded by the *Markaze Farhangi Zanan* (Women's Cultural Center) to support activists' communication throughout the OMS campaign. She explained that at the peak of their campaign, the number of members grew at an incredible pace. Besides Tehran, the campaign was able to set up offices in 16 other provinces. She continued:

Well! E-mail groups were the only way to find regular and instant access to campaign managers and their members in other provinces.... How else could we receive reports and thoughts from those who, for example, lived in Zahedan⁴⁴? That was how about 70-80 e-mail groups took shape when the campaign had hit its zenith.

Three interviewees went further, suggesting that the opportunity e-mail groups provided for the participation of scattered activists prepared the ground for the creation of collective identity and trust among women's rights activists who have no physical contact. From the perspective of Interviewee 11, physical proximity was a determinant factor in building trust and collective identity among the activists. She maintained that over the recent years, e-mails have, to a great extent, eliminated the problem of physical distance between activists. "Now our collective identity is, to a lesser extent, dependent on our physical interaction." Interviewee 3 noted that "these [e-mail] groups have prevented the geographical gap from widening the mental gap." He continued: "By setting a communication line which did not exist before, now an activist in a remote city in Iran realizes that those in the big cities care for her concerns." He firmly believed that e-mail groups have assisted the activist groups in setting an agenda that encompasses the priorities and demands of "wider groups from wider geographical locations." His assertion that e-mail groups have informed dispersed activists about each other's views and expectations was underlined by Interviewee 2's experience of the time she joined the OMS campaign in a small city in Iran:

It was through these e-mail lists that we recognized the ideological differences between the guys [the activists] in Tehran and in smaller cities. For instance,

44 The capital of Sistan and Baluchistan Province, located at a distance of 1,605 km from the Iranian capital, near the border with Pakistan and Afghanistan.

those who run the campaign offices in other provinces were more in favor of central leadership. In Tehran, the idea was not to limit the leadership to persons.... They were all agreed on the formation of leadership committees.

The respondents did not limit the opportunity for receiving dispersed voices to activists inside Iran. They remarked that e-mail communication has been apparently influential in the participation of activists who had left the country for personal or political reasons in the decision-making. Interviewee 9 explained that before 2009 women's rights activists who left Iran were mainly scholars aiming to pursue academic objectives. "For the activists inside [the country], it was crucial to have the valuable opinions of these activists.... The e-mail groups gave us this possibility." Interviewee 8 reminded that contact with activists who pursued the OMS campaign in ten foreign countries was established through "a specific e-mail group known as Activists Abroad. It was a communication bridge between activists in different countries and the campaign organizers [inside Iran]."

A number of respondents also pointed to the opportunity that e-mail communication provided for the large number of the activists who left the country after the 2009 presidential election "to maintain their participation in internal discussions while they couldn't be physically active," said Interviewee 5. It was explained in Chapter 2 (Section 2.2.6) that in the aftermath of the 2009 election, the women's rights movement lost many of its members, who left Iran mainly on the pretext of state persecution. Interviewee 10 remarked that not all the activists overseas wished to maintain their ties with the women's rights groups inside the country; but for those who did still feel connected, the Internet, in particular e-mail groups, has been the medium to remain attached to the activism:

We lost the physical presence of these activists, but we used their knowledge to enhance our theoretical foundations. Therefore, the internet helped us to turn a part of this threat to an opportunity.... Many of these activists found the possibility to continue their studies or participate in international seminars. Some of them could get involved in local NGOs. Well! Many preferred to continue their activities independently from domestic [women's rights] groups. But some stayed connected through the Internet. They were participating in e-mail discussions on the planning of activities.

Interviewee 11 put more emphasis on the harmful consequences of activists' emigration in the years following the 2009 protests. "The wave of emigration was hugely disappointing because we are activists, so we are supposed to show more resistance.... It damaged our networks because the rate of immigration was higher than the participation of new activists." However, she described the effectiveness of e-mail groups formed before 2009 in preventing these emigrant activists from being "completely and immediately" detached from the internal debates of activism. Her testimony also provides a preface to discussions on the next sub-theme:

Since a few years before the emigrations, activists had been promoting the use of cyberspace in a bid to strengthen their networks. This was mainly because the small groups and the campaigns did not have the required facilities for in-person meetings. Besides, the government monitoring was tight.... After the [2009] election, these virtual groups [e-mail groups] came to help us to hear the voice of the emigrant activists.

6.1.2 Reducing costs of offline meetings

The interview evidence illustrates that by reducing the security and financial costs of offline meetings, e-mail groups have increased the number of sessions of deliberations within women's rights groups. After maintaining communication with the scattered activists, the lower risk of state surveillance was the second most mentioned benefit of e-mail groups' discussions. Therefore, the interview analysis suggests that these two factors were the initial reasons behind the formation of the activists' e-mail groups.

The expressed experiences on the issue of online interaction safety against the security costs of face-to-face interactions were entirely concentrated on the era of the Ahmadinejad administration and not expanded to the Rouhani administration. Interviewee 10, 2, and 1 provided the most comprehensive explanation about the difficulties in holding offline meetings in the aftermath of the OMS campaign and the 2009 protests. Interviewee 10 explained:

The days that followed his [Ahmadinejad] presidency caused the worst situation for activists. Many NGOs were forcibly shut down. So the activities mainly operated in the form of small and informal groups, which had no specific location and normally no defined set of members. These groups' meetings were mostly controlled and restricted.... In this situation, e-mail lists were the only ways to

communicate. If we did not have them, the activists would have remained disconnected.

Emphasizing that the situation for activism got harder after 2009, Interviewee 2 noted that: “I consider the oppression to be very much influential on the use of e-mail.” To support her view, she said: “Other groups of activists who were under less state control, like those who were just working on children’s issues, used online spaces to a lesser extent.” Interviewee 1 explained that in the NGO she runs “the goal is to choose ways for social activities that would cause minimum damage to activists and at the same time would yield maximum results.” For this reason, she said online communication is considered the main communication channel by her NGO’s members. Similar to Interviewee 2, she considered “the exacerbation of tensions between the state and women’s rights groups” to be a positive in the growth of activists’ e-mail groups. Interviewee 11 approached this issue from a different perspective. She noted that prior to the formation of e-mail groups, the major risk of activism was posed at “the core of activism - those who were regular participants in offline gatherings.” She emphasized that “the relocation of meetings to e-mail groups changed the situation in a way that only a few key actors don’t have to be responsible for all actions.”

Besides security risks, the financial cost of offline meetings was named as the other significant barrier due to which the groups could not facilitate the participation of certain members in their internal debates. Interviewee 7 pointed out the possibility of e-mail communication saving the groups from the expenses of offline gatherings. When asked to explain the activist groups’ budget sources, and why cost reduction is of great importance to them, he replied by separating NGOs from informal groups and specific case-based campaigns:

Budgeting has always been a very challenging issue. Normally, the NGOs are in a better situation. They have their own offices and defined sources of funding. They definitely deal with financial issues, but the problem is much more serious for the [informal] groups and the campaigns. They mostly run on members' contributions. One may devote her office or her home while others account for other costs.

Interviewee 10’s testimony suggests that before the formation of e-mail groups, there was little room for the contribution of younger activists in the key debates due to the groups’ financial

constraints. “As they [women’s rights groups] could not afford the cost of large gatherings, they had to limit their invitations to those who were more influential due to their experience and reputation.” According to Interviewee 9, these gatherings were mainly held “in coffee shops, members' offices (after working hours), and in their homes.” Interviewee 5 noted that e-mail communication has not only saved expenses for meeting organizers, it has also eliminated the costs of trips by individual activists participating in the gatherings: “Many young activists were penniless. They had no source of income. [Via e-mail groups], they participated in the discussions on a daily basis without having to be troubled by the costs.”

The interview analysis suggests that the participation of young and geographically dispersed activists, largely absent in the groups’ discussions before the formation of e-mail groups, has increased the quality of the groups’ decision outcomes. Interviewee 5 explained: “With the growth of e-mail interactions, because we gained the participation of activists from smaller cities, the diversity of opinions increased, so we witnessed more creativity in the decisions.” Interviewee 9 remarked that e-mail groups “help us scrutinize a subject and be aware of its hidden aspects because it is discussed from different perspectives.” More specifically, she acknowledged the constructive role of young activists in decision-making:

Their contributions have been greatly influential...They have unframed minds so they look at the issues from different angles.... Because they spend more time on the Internet and, unlike us [the older activists], they know how to search for the best sources of information, they are more aware of the events and discourses that are taking place globally.

The analysis uncovers that the enhancement of the activist groups’ decision-making on e-mail groups is also related to the fact that the members, even the most experienced ones, do not resist the challenging ideas of young activists. This was a common finding both for leaderless groups like the OMS campaign, and those acting within more clear lines of leadership, like the NGO managed by Interviewee 7. The researcher asked Interviewee 2 and 8, both of whom provided the most details about brainstorming in the OMS campaign’s e-mail groups, to explain if the viewpoints of participating activists were treated similarly regardless of their age and experience and position within the leadership committees. Both respondents asserted that the value of an idea was not defined by its presenters, but by its strength and applicability to the situation under

investigation. Interviewee 8 said there were no limits for participants in expressing their ideas, and that every member, regardless of his/her background, could challenge others' positions. Interviewee 2 provided a more detailed response to the researcher's question:

It cannot be said that such factors as age or the length of activism were determining factors in decision-making. There were activists like X and Y [two well-known activists], who were among the organizers and the main spokespersons of the campaign in the media. But no one felt like she/he should not reject their idea because of their position.... In most cases, the members used to agree on the stronger logic and not ideas that were stated more regularly or were presented by famous members.

Similarly, Interviewee 7, who pointed at the opportunity that online communication has given him to involve his NGO members in key discussions, declared that he allows members to oppose his opinions. "In numerous cases, we modified the previously set policies when we were faced with the more novel opinions of our young members."

This theme suggests that as an activism which extends over the entire country and operates under state control and budget constraints, women's rights activism has extremely benefited from the employment of e-mail communication in bypassing the obstacles of offline meeting, and in sustaining and strengthening its internal relationship. The constructive impact of e-mail technology on the activism's internal relations will receive more evidence in the next theme. Aside from the utilization of e-mail groups for dialogue and decision-making, the following interview theme reveals that these online groups are also effective in the organization and broadcasting of collective actions across the network of the activism.

6.2 Theme Two: Activist websites and e-mail groups have stimulated interactivity and collaboration among the activist groups

It was explained in Chapter 5 that aside from disseminating information about women's rights issues, the activist websites also spread information about their affiliated women's rights groups and activists. The interview evidence suggests that in addition to generating publicity for the groups in society (see Chapter 5, Section 5.1.1), such online information enables activist groups to become aware of each other's aims and activities themselves. Interviewees 10 and 11 elaborated on this opportunity. Interviewee 10 noted: "Websites give the groups a voice to

introduce themselves. Thus, we become aware of each other without having to hold physical meetings and visits.” She emphasized that many of the activist groups are operating informally without any office. “We recognize these groups primarily through their websites. These websites do not only transmit information. They construct bridges between different ideologies and groups inside the activism.” Interviewee 11 focused on the relation that the websites have created amongst various women’s groups across the country:

We can find information about the activities of hundreds of big and small organizations which operate in the country to assist women in resolving their difficulties. Having this information we [members of the group she cooperated with] can identify the groups that share goals with us, the ones that can help us in the pursuit of our objective.

In addition to making the activist groups aware of each other, websites play a significant role in exhibiting their solidarity. Interviewee 9 recalled that in 2005, in protest to the massive filtering of women’s websites and blogs in Iran, an activist website called *Teribune Feministie Iran* (Iran’s Feminist Tribune), together with some other websites, sent a letter to the World Summit on the Information Society in Tunisia. In response to this action, two months later, *Teribune Feministie Iran* was filtered. She added: “In solidarity with this website on a certain day - it was in November, I guess - numerous women’s websites changed their names to *Teribune Feministie Iran*.”

Besides using e-mails to process activism internal debates, the interview analysis reveals that Iranian women’s rights groups also use their e-mail groups to organize their actions and distribute information on their collective actions. The majority of the interviewees who were members of different e-mail groups referred to these online groups as the most common means of receiving and distributing notices of events and initiatives. Although they reported that this online technology is also used for intra-group planning, the greatest part of their testimonies was related to the opportunity that it has provided for collaborations among activist groups.

Interviewee 4 asserted “e-mail groups have formed a network over which the activists from different groups can come together and organize their joint actions.” During the interviews, four cases of such collaboration were exemplified. Interviewee 2 maintained: “A few months ago, I was added to an e-mail group. It was formed by activists from three [women’s rights] groups in

which programs for the commemoration of International Women’s Day had been talked about.” Interviewee 8 explained that in multiple cases she signed statements that the activist groups had distributed through e-mail groups. Interviewee 9 provided an example of such statements. She named the coalition that 40 women’s groups formed prior to the 2009 presidential election to present women’s demands to the presidential candidates (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2.6). She explained that the joint statement was shared with involved organizations and individuals through the coalition’s e-mail groups. She remarked that the formed e-mail groups were later used for the exchange of viewpoints about the post-election tensions. The explanations presented by Interviewee 10 about the coalition which was formed in protest to Ahmadinejad’s proposed Family Protection Bill (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2.6) clearly illustrate the network building capacity of e-mail groups, while also showing how activist websites can manifest women’s rights groups’ solidarity:

An e-mail group with about 400 members was formed. All the planning was done through this [e-mail] group. The responsibilities were divided among the [activist] groups, and of course individuals, who were acting jointly on this cause. Activist journalists accepted to interview the MPs. Well-known activists formed lobbying groups to meet with the MPs.... And finally we made arrangements so that in large cities, the activists would contact their MPs on ratification day and voice their objections.... They [the groups] also devoted a significant part of their websites to this cause. All the websites’ organizers agreed to put the logo [of the formed coalition] on their websites and publish brochures.

The activist websites’ role in the above-mentioned case was observed in the Women for Parliament campaign, which was formed by activists from different women’s rights groups. Aside from the campaign’s website, websites of the involved groups contributed to the rise of the campaign popularity by publishing its statements and campaigners’ articles and interviews with the press. Also, as an act of support, activist groups such as *Madreseye Feministi*⁴⁵ (The Feminism School), *Kanoone Shahrivandiye Zanan*⁴⁶ (Women’s Citizenship Center) (see Figure

45 www.feministschool.com/

46 equalcitizenship.com/

6.1), and *Kanoone Zanane Irani*⁴⁷ (Iranian Women's Center), put the campaign logo and/or video clip on their websites' homepages. The Women for Parliament website made evident the stronger affiliation that the campaign had with the Feminism School group. During the campaign's lifetime, not only did the Feminism School continuously re-publish numerous materials of the campaign on its website, but the campaign's website in turn circulated articles by Feminism School activists about women's share in the country's power structure.

With regards to this theme, the interviews offered no evidence to support the same role for SNSs. This while, the observational analysis suggests that these sites, too, can be effective in fostering the interactivity of activist groups. First, in all four observed cases similar to the websites, Facebook profiles, too, presented information about groups' and campaigns' objectives and activists, although to a much lower extent, showing that SNSs, as well, have the potential to familiarize groups with one another. Second, an online investigation of the Women for Parliament campaign demonstrated that some groups which promoted the campaign through their websites also used their Facebook pages to manifest support (e.g. *Madreseye Feministi* and *Kanoone Shahrvasandiye Zanan*).

In order to explain an absolute lack of evidence in the interviews to consider the same impact for SNSs, a finding in Chapter 5 comes to the fore again. For women's rights groups, their websites serve as the primary and official public communication channel, while SNSs support the Websites' broadcasting role (see Chapter 5, Section 5.1). In line with this finding, the interview evidence in this section suggests that when activist groups intend to become aware of each other's activities or contribute to the publicity of one another, websites come to play the main role. In the case of Women for Parliament, even the posts that women's rights groups published on their Facebook pages about the campaign were not shared from the campaign's Facebook page, but rather were links to the campaign website. This theme offers fresh evidence that websites are the official online platform of activist groups in broadcasting their certified information. Seemingly, SNSs have not obtained such a status within activist groups yet.

47 ir-women.com/

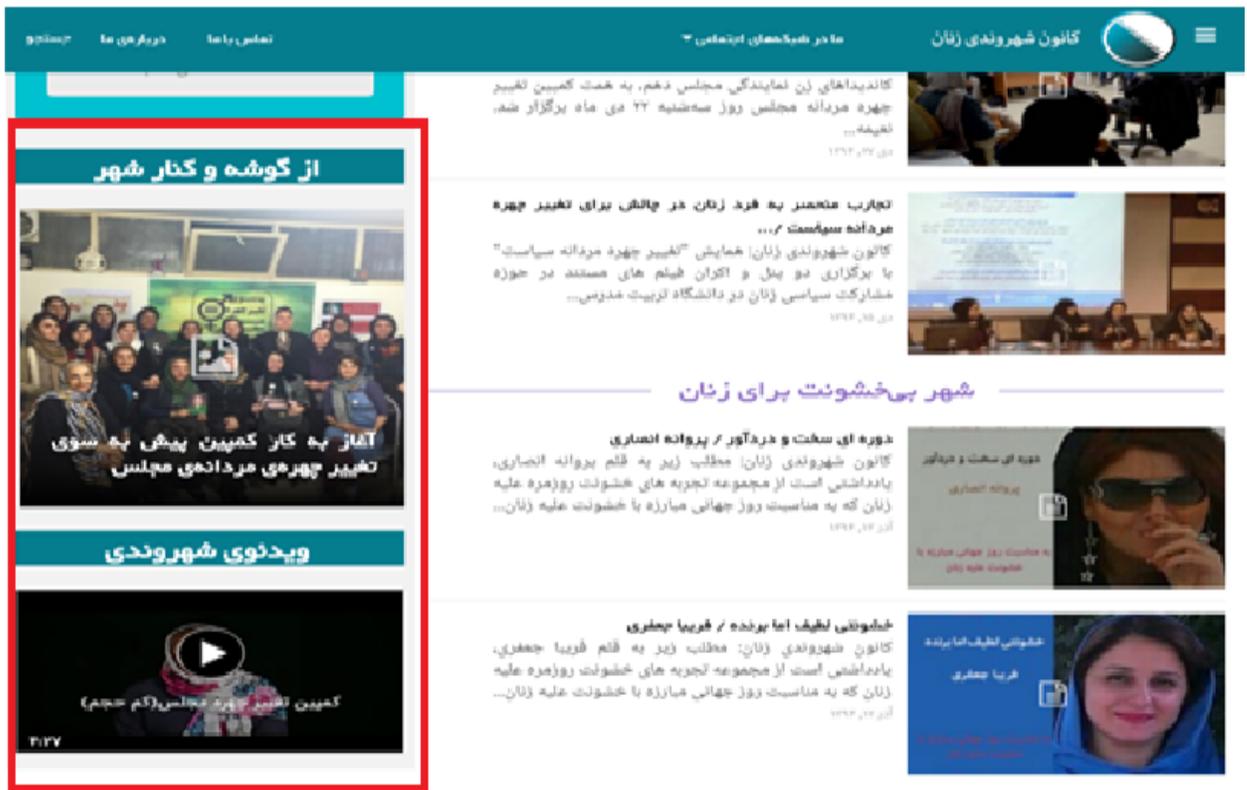


Figure 6.1: The Women's Citizenship Center homepage. Retrieved December 05, 2015, from equalcitizenship.com. In the public domain.

Note: On the left is the announcement of the Women for Parliament campaign's formation and its official video clip.

This theme demonstrated the role of websites and e-mail groups in fostering the cooperative network of women's rights activism. Interviewees' experiences showed that in recent years these online technologies have been a key player in the coordination of campaigns, coalitions, and other joint actions among the activist groups. In all 11 interviews, the greatest part of assertions about the promises of the Internet was expressed with respect to activists' websites and e-mail groups. The next theme brings into light another benefit of activist websites.

6.3 Theme Three: Women's rights websites have fostered activists' personal empowerment

6.3.1 Knowledge building

The evidence generated from the interviews shows that groups' websites have advanced activists' personal empowerment by training them, both theoretically and practically, on issues related to women's rights. As remarked in the previous chapter, while the majority of information on activist websites addresses the general public, these online sites also generate

content that is particularly directed toward interested activists. Both interview and observational analyses provide instances of information as such. Interviewee 11 exemplified *Madreseye Feministi* (The Feminism School) website and explained that it provides specific articles and e-books that “enhance activism’s theoretical foundation.” Interviewee 9 spoke of such articles as an attempt to bridge the gap “between theories or intellectual debates and practice.” Interviewee 11 also mentioned that activist Websites actively publish articles that are self-critical of activism, such as: “the faults in dealing with obstacles, the weaknesses that exist in the organizations’ intra-relations, criticism of women’s campaigns and how they could have been more effective and so on.” From her perspective, the articles as such help activists to learn from their faults.

Among the observed cases, Safe Home is the forerunner in the provision of materials which are of particular use to activists. The group holds online courses for women’s rights activists who have the experience of working with victims of domestic violence or who are lawyers or psychology graduates who intend to work on relevant cases. An online course on the “comparative analysis of domestic violence regulations in Iran and the UK” was held during the observation period. In the meantime, two sessions from a series of podcasts for social activists were published. Figure 6.2 shows these podcasts. The top one called ‘Analysis of Violence Patterns’ and the second, created from one of the online courses, is ‘Brainstorming Among Activists and Lawyers about Establishing Constructive Relationships with Domestic Violence Victims’.

In addition, the group published informative articles, e-booklet, e-brochures, and PowerPoint presentations on its website to educate activists about the legal and social aspects of domestic violence. The PowerPoint presentations taught them about various subjects, such as ‘The Solutions to Reduce Domestic Violence’, ‘The Principles of Writing a Report about a Domestic Violence Case’, and ‘Communication with Victim Clients’. In the note sections, these presentations also provide teaching instructions for activists wanting to present the same in their workshops. The researcher also found a distinctive link on the homepage, called ‘Capacity Building’, directing visitors to a guideline concerning capacity building in nonprofit organizations: the management of social projects, resource mobilization and management, self-assessment, and alignment with society’s demands. It should be noted that no single material informative as such to activists was observed on Safe Home’s Facebook profile.



Figure 6.2: Safe Home podcasts produced to train activists. Retrieved May 02, 2015, from <http://www.khanehamn.org/archives/category/podcasts>. In the public domain.

The amount of informative materials that are principally of use to activists was relatively lower in the other cases. Bidarzani.com presented legal documents and guidelines about the country's Family Protection Law. The Stepdaughter website published an interactive diagram describing the chronology of Marriage with Stepdaughter clause, and linked viewers to numerous legislative and official documents compiled by campaign activists. The Women for Parliament website published a number of articles about how women's rights activists can affect parliamentarians' decision-making.

The interview statements that constructed this sub-theme were, to the largest extent, concentrated on such materials as those specifically targeting activists. However, the testimonies of a number of respondents suggests that other professionally written materials conveyed through the groups' websites, mainly research-based materials and translated articles, not only contribute to awareness-building among the public, they also boost activists' knowledge. Interviewee 8 explained that the "academically compiled materials" of the activist websites assisted her in creating her workshops' agenda and discussions: "For example, the e-books that very systematically present statistics about domestic violence or women's labor market." This interviewee's experience can be best observed in a booklet published by the Bidarzani website

called ‘The Effects of Population Policies on Women’. One part of the educational contents on the Bidarzani website are e-booklets written academically, and mostly in response to politicians’ decision-making. The aforementioned booklet, for example, was published in relation to the shift in recent years in birth control policies⁴⁸. It presented historical arguments about Iran’s birth control policies, discussed the possible drawbacks of the recent policy shift by taking a look at other countries’ experiences, and suggested solutions that should be considered by the government and activists alike in order to heal the unwelcoming consequences of these policies on women (“The Effects of Population Policies”, 2015).

Three interviewees paid great attention to the knowledge-building potential of translated articles available on activist websites. Interviewee 4 elaborated on a very common trend among activists in translating academic and opinion articles about women’s rights activism in other countries:

For many years, we have had an eye on the activities and breakthroughs of women’s rights activists in other countries, particularly regional and Muslim countries. Unfortunately, save for the Reform Era, there has been a very limited relationship between Iranian and regional activists. To fill this gap, since the beginning, activist websites have been publishing translations of articles about other countries’ activists and transformations related to women’s issues in the region. This is because we always feel an overwhelming desire to learn from their strategies.

The last sentence in this quote clarifies more through one case exemplified by Interviewee 8 about the initial idea behind the formation of the OMS campaign: “One of fellow activists found an article on a foreign website about a very similar campaign in Morocco. She told the activists in the *Markaze Farhangi Zanan* (Women’s Cultural Center) about it and the campaign was formed.” This interviewee emphasized that women’s rights activists always look for new ways to

48 For years, Iran could successfully control its population growth by promoting the idea that “two children are enough.” As a result, demographic growth went down from 3.9 percent a year in 1986 to 1.3 percent in 2011 (“The Effects of Population Policies”, 2015). Since 2012, however, Iran has dramatically shifted its population policy to encourage population growth. The new policy pays families for each child and deposits money into that child’s bank account until their 18th birthday.

pursue their issues. To this end, she said: “The articles about other countries’ experiences or a theoretical debate help us to get ideas for our activities and avoid possible mistakes.” Acknowledging the efforts of her fellow activists who manage activist websites to identify and translate articles written in other languages, Interviewee 9 noted: “Compared to the 1980s and the 1990s, activists are much more informed about regional and international transformation and uprisings. Now we feel that we are moving in a brighter way.”

In line with interviewees’ assertions, a significant amount of the translated articles published in the Bidarzani and Safe Home websites demonstrate the value that information about foreign women’s development has for Iranian women’s rights activists. Numerous articles published by Safe Home were, in fact, translations of foreign articles about the practices of activists, NGOs, and governments around the world in fighting domestic violence: articles about the most effective laws in Western countries, such as the UK, Muslim countries’ efforts and progress, and performance of international organizations to outlaw domestic abuse. Other translated articles on this website were opinion articles by foreign scholars and activists on the problem of domestic violence.

The Bidarzani group concentrated mainly on compiling and translating articles and book excerpts addressing women’s rights on a theoretical basis: articles about feminism, gender, and sexuality written mostly by prominent gender studies’ scholars. Other translated articles narrated the experiences of activists around the world enhancing women’s rights in their own communities, ranging from struggles for black women’s rights by famous American activist Angela Davis to Afghan activists’ endeavors in battling the cultural norms imposed on women’s education.

6.3.2 Maintaining activist websites

Besides visitor activists, websites also empower activists participating in their maintenance. This was a common notion held by four interviewees who shared the experience of co-operating with activist websites. Interviewee 6 explained that each woman’s rights website, like other forms of publication, produces a new group of authors or provides more publications from existing authors. He remarked that “the new authors learn how to write. The experienced ones grow by subjecting their opinions to public judgment, and in this way, they revisit their viewpoints.” Interviewee 8 noted that the ability to write is essential for activists. To this end, she recounted that some women’s rights groups held writing workshops for activists: “These [workshops] were

essential, considering the fact that women are historically verbal and write less than men.” She remembered that for a number of activists, writing on the *Kooche Be Kooche* page on the OMS campaign’s website (introduced in Chapter 5, section 5.1.1) was their time expressing their experiences in written form.

Interviewee 11’s experience in co-operating with a number of women’s websites showed her that the maintenance of these websites increases activists’ sense of responsibility. Additionally, the content management activities “boost their ability to recognize and organize opinions, to analyze the situation, and to improve their writing capabilities.” Because of these benefits, she said, she always encourages activists in smaller cities “to launch their own websites and not be content with just co-operating with website teams in Tehran.”

Interviewee 4 explained why the management of a prominent women’s campaign “was a precious experience and a sort of personal empowerment” for her:

I took the responsibility of a job in which I had no experience. I had to learn news report writing skills, and other responsibilities as a website manager. Well, I had the experience of writing articles but not news articles. I used to check other websites to see how they portray their events so that they would gain maximum attention. I got help from activists who had journalism experience to teach me these skills.... I learned about the impacts of media, particularly at the point that we used website to report the government's disputes with the campaigners.

This interviewee also said that her co-operation with this website reinforced her connections to other activists and social and political figures: “I had to contact them either to ask them to sign the statements on the website or to post their opinion articles.” Interviewee 11 raised a similar point, explaining that the management of the activist website strengthened the activists’ team working skills, “particularly at the occasions when [the state] repression did not allow the formation of collective actions.”

6.4 Theme Four: Individual activists’ use of SNSs has raised tensions within the women’s rights activism network

This theme emerges from a collection of interviewees’ experiences and observation of individual Facebook profiles’ posts and comments to suggest that the exclusive public communication platforms that SNSs provide for the individual women’s rights activists, despite the discussed

promises for their relationship with the public (see Chapter 5, Section 5.2), have given rise to internal tensions within the activism network. The following sub-themes explain that such tensions have emerged from two interrelated factors: the rise of individualism and so-called ‘branding of the activism’.

6.4.1 Persuasion of individualism

There was an assumption among six of the eleven interviewed activists that, by providing independent spaces for activists to freely express their opinions, SNSs have increased individualism in two main ways: (a) individualism in the distribution of collective information, and (b) overemphasizing individual viewpoints. With regards to the former, the interview evidence demonstrates that tensions have been created by Individual activists’ attempts to share opinions and information that can be perceived by the public as representing the opinions and information of activist groups. Interviewee 9 noted that there have been many cases in recent years in which a group of activists got into trouble for what a single activist had distributed on her SNSs profiles. “For instance, we had arguments over the improper timing of publicizing details of meetings and correspondences that we had with officials.” Similarly, Interviewee 5 explained that “one of the serious problems is that in these spaces [SNSs], the personal opinions of activists are demonstrated to a great extent. They are not in many cases in line with the collective position that we have taken in our groups.” She clarified by referring, specifically, to activists who introduced themselves as group members in their SNSs profiles, but then publishing independent viewpoints. She said this trend has caused challenges and disagreements within activist groups, and cited the following example:

When Ms. Mollaverdi was selected as the vice president [for women’s affairs], we had not yet gained any official position about her appointment. But some fellows published personal comments supporting her. That created the impression that our group had approved her. After this, we had serious arguments that if we want to write as members of the group, we should reflect the group’s standpoint.

The interview analysis suggests that activists’ relationship is not only threatened by individualism in presentation of collective information, which mainly results in internal disputes within the activist groups, rivalry and division has also been created amongst activists maintaining social networking sites’ profiles in which they place excessive emphasis on their

individual viewpoints. Interviewee 3 took the firm position that contrary to activist websites, on SNSs, “because of the existence of personal profiles, instead of concentrating on our commonalities, we concentrate on the differences. Instead of focusing on common objectives, we lay emphasis on showing ourselves.” Such a notion was explicit in other testimonies as well. Interviewee 11 remarked that while activist websites focus on presenting awareness-building materials, on social networking sites activists “overstress” personal opinions and analyses. Interviewee 6 compared the impact of activists’ SNSs profiles with that of e-mail groups, noting that in e-mail groups, through conversations, activists can reach alignment and convergence. “On the contrary we can see many disputes among the activists from different groups on social networks [SNSs].”

The observation of the four individual Facebook profiles underlines the mentioned statements by providing examples in which the activists’ internal disagreements were opened to the public. In the post that was updated by Activist B, regarding the Stepdaughter campaign, she publicly blamed some of her fellow activists for justifying the parliament standpoint about the ratified clause:

The debates under way these days about the legislation on marriage with stepdaughters remind me of the discussions about the elimination of legal limitations to polygamy. On the latter issue, the parliamentarians claimed that men could get married with the consent of their first wife and without having a court permission, saying they wanted to impose the law on this issue and claimed that they were working in favor of women. The major difference between today's debates and those discussions lies in the point that, by that time, nobody accepted that argument. We kept protesting until the law was abolished. But today many, including activists, are aligned with the parliament and they are justifying the parliament's legislation. The main issue is to know how we have become different. We ourselves, and not the parliament or government, must be at the receiving end of criticisms.

The analysis of comments made to this post revealed a noteworthy point. As was foreshadowed by the testimony of Interviewee 6 (“These activists publicize their criticism of each other [on SNSs], which is not interesting for the public audience.”), the activist’s followers showed no

interest in getting involved in this internal disagreement. This post received the least number of comments compared to the other posts of this activist. The five comments made under this post were general viewpoints about the case without any hint of the core subject.

In the case of the Women for Parliament campaign, posts updated by Activists C and D in support of the campaign received numerous comments by activists disagreeing with the campaign's formation. The following comments best clarify the interviewees' declaration:

Arman: By lowering demands to this extent, this campaign closes the way to radical forces. It targets a short-lived target which will fade in the public memory without any achievement. With inefficient methods like 'red card,' this campaign is the fall of activists' demands.

Sara: Undoubtedly female candidates' electioneering through this campaign will result in their disqualification [by the Guardian Council]. If this happens, will you accept the consequences of your strategy? Our friends in this campaign should have selected a group of women's candidates in silence and postponed propagating for them until after the vetting process.

Negar: We should first review the shameless speeches of women MPs in the parliament. Then we find out that increasing the number of biological women in the parliament will not heal our pain, and could even worsen them.

Besides the campaign's objective, the way that it was being operated was the subject of a number of arguments in the comments. As an example, the following discussion was formed between Activist C and another women's rights activist, named here as Arash, by the post which was linked to the campaign's official video clip:

Arash: This video clip looks like those which are usually made by cinema super stars for persuasion of specific goals. Why should we think that we are celebrities? I believe that making fun in the video clip of a campaign that has a very serious message will destroy its image."

Activist C: why do you think that these kind of clips should be necessarily made by super stars? Why shouldn't social and political activists who are much more thoughtful than celebrities make such works?

Arash: When did I say that activists should not make video clips? I am trying to say that we should not copy others' work without thinking. We should have had our own approach so that the results will not be so meaningless and even with reverse ramifications.

When Interviewee 8 argued of the negative consequences of SNSs, saying that “these networks [SNSs] have caused some internal divisions,” the researcher asked her if the divisions were created just on these online networks or were they a reflection of differences in the real world, to which she replied: “Yes. These differences definitely emerge from disputes in the real world. But when they enter social networks [SNSs], they get expanded.” She explained that while in the e-mail groups, activists try to find a common solution, “on Facebook, where they are watched by users, their concern primarily is to defend their positions.” Another example, derived from the Facebook pages of Activist A, clearly supports this statement. In this case, Activist A remained uncompromising on her positions with no intention of reaching a common point of view with the activists commenting on her post. She posted a status update regarding the controversial Stepdaughter clause:

The parliament published a report which says the number of this kind of marriage was concerning, that is why the parliament had to make it conditional upon family court approval. Where is their source? There are no statistics in their report. When we have no reliable report, we can judge based on our observation: such marriages were very exceptional. The law cannot be set based on exceptional cases.

This post heated up a discussion between her and a visitor activist, named Dana in this thesis:

Dana: “I think the logic behind your argument is not correct. We cannot judge based on our observation.”

Activist A: “Based on our observation, they were exceptional. We cannot rely on the parliament report.”

Dana: “First, I should say that I am strongly against this type of marriage. But I am also against your logic. You say the parliament report is not reliable. Well, how do you claim that your observation is reliable? Where is the basis of your

observation? Tehran? Have you also taken other cities into consideration? If we think the law is wrong, we should present a stronger and more reasonable argumentation.”

The commenting continued with both activists insisting on their positions. The final comment by Activist A became intense in tone, which encouraged the commentator to leave the conversation:

Activist A: “This is what I think is true. If someone thinks she has a better logic, she should start struggling with her own logic instead of wasting her time and energy on rating other activists’ posts.”

Dana: “I think the goal behind posting comments is more than rating and competition. By the way, if my comments bother you, I’ll leave the conversation. Have a good day!”

These comments underline the interviewees' concern about the substitution of deliberative arguments with personal disputes by the rise in individual SNSs profiles. As Interviewee 9 described: “Everyone is defending their own alternative without considering the need for having a conclusion.” Such behavior can be related to the rise of interest in gaining personal popularity, a phenomenon specifically addressed by the next sub-theme.

6.4.2 Branding of activism

Interviewees 4 and 6 explained that in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential election, many women’s rights activists started using SNSs because there was little room for on-the-ground activities. These interviewees emphasized that a number of these activists never managed to reduce their reliance on SNSs. “They were imprisoned by these spaces and preferred to use them as their main activism platform even when they were provided with opportunities for real world activities.” Interviewee 4 voiced this problem and related it to the sense of popularity that such activists have gained through SNSs. “They asked themselves, when I have thousands of followers on board, why should I leave these spaces [SNSs] and go back to where few might know me?” Against the risks of offline activism in Iranian context, this popularity seems to be what Interviewee 6 named ‘reward’. “Some chose these networks [SNSs] to the real world because they were given more rewards and less punishment.”

The two NGO managers interviewed for this study also remarked on the impact SNSs have in distracting activists from on-the-ground activities, based on personal experience. Interviewee 7 noted that some of his NGO members, particularly younger activists, paid more attention to their public image on social media than achieving real outcomes. He remarked: “These networks’ [SNSs’] comments especially have made them reactionary in the way that they spend numerous hours on these sites defending themselves.” In this regard, he narrated a personal observation:

We once asked a TV show to invite people and groups to co-operate with us. Well, this was followed by a wave of criticism on social media.... Some people believed that we should have not asked a state-sponsored channel for such a thing, as we are independent activists.... I remember that our younger colleagues were arguing with the critics, trying to reply to all the comments and messages ... and this lasted for about a week. The discussions made them so exhausted.... I remember one of them came to me with her phone very anxiously and said, “Look what they have written!” I said, “Well, that’s their problem. Leave them alone and get back to work.”

Similarly, Interviewee 1 asserted that the younger members of her NGO “dedicate a great amount of time, which should be devoted to the NGO activities, to capturing the attention of [SNS] users.” The emergence of online activities focussing on gaining popularity and the approval of audiences at the expense of the activism’s goals and persuasion is what Interviewee 3 named “the branding of the activism.” Along with the majority of interviewees, he noted the growth of such activities on SNSs. The interview analysis uncovered two major conditions under which these activities turn to the source of division and tension among women’s rights activists.

First, tension arises when, in search of more endorsement, some women’s rights activists overstress the importance of their own activities and/or the issues at hand by way of the direct and uncontrolled communication channels that SNSs offer. A number of respondents expressed disagreement with this trend, arguing that SNSs give some activists and their issues “fake importance” (Interviewee 3) in the eyes of the public, pushing those activists with less online social networking activity to the margins. Interviewee 9 stressed: “Some activists have more skills or time to present themselves on these spaces [SNSs]. So they make readers overestimate

the significance of the cases they are targeting.” She highlighted that this trend is particularly harmful to the activism “in the situation that in the absence of a free press, online media has found a critical position in society.” Interviewee 8 narrated a personal experience:

Some of the activists, whom I know in person, don’t have considerable activities on-the-ground. But just because they are always on the Internet, they create this perception that they are among the most active of us! People have many times come to me asking, “What is X doing?” I’ve replied: “Nothing special. She is not participating in the meetings.” “Are you sure? She is always on Google Plus and seems so active.”

The interviewee continued more angrily: “Such an activist is not making as much of an effort as the activists who deal with a variety of difficulties on real activities, but she is seen more by the public.” She then named a number of activists involved in big projects but are not used to promoting themselves on social media.

Interviewee 5 criticized the same group of activists, saying that they have demeaned activism. “Our work is not only about launching media hype. Although sometimes media hype is necessary, what we need more of is a real action. Our work is about bringing real changes to the lives of women.” She then spoke of a noteworthy behavior. She said that on SNSs some of these activists not only build on their own activities, they try to get credit for activities that were conducted collectively. She declared that, aside from gaining public recognition, over the recent years, such online behavior has provided some activists with international opportunities, such as academic scholarships and research grants from international foundations: “Tensions were created between these activities and the groups they belonged to. Other activists asked why we should shoulder the burden of activities while others are using them to their own personal advantage.” This point was also raised by Interviewee 3. He took the firm position that not all the activists who left the country in recent years were motivated by political pressures. “If this was the case, how could we stay inside and continue our activities? Why in these years were we not imprisoned?” He then recounted that a great part of the emigration was due to the opportunities that international foundations provided to Iranian women’s rights activists, emphasizing that the number of such opportunities has risen since the proliferation of social media:

She [an activist] constructs ten pages in multiple social media. She writes in Persian and English. She introduces herself as a member of a women's campaign. It is definite that she gains more attention than her fellow activists who might have even made more contributions.

The interview evidence suggests that the second cause that attention for gaining popularity on SNSs creates tension among women's rights activists is that some activists concentrate more on women's demands that hold more appeal for societal groups that dominate SNSs. As explained in Chapter 5 (section 5.5), the interviewees were concerned that, due to Internet access and usage inequalities, demands expressed by the online public do not represent the voice of the totality of Iranian women. The statements by Interviewees 10, 4, and 8 suggest that the division between the demand priorities of activists who overwhelmingly deal with their social media audiences and those who spend a larger portion of their time interacting with offline society has created internal arguments.

Interviewee 10 noted that "the discussions on social media are the problems of the middle class. When we check them against the realities of society, we find out that there are many issues that are of greater priority for other social classes." She made the internal argumentation over this issue more apparent by asserting that one of the main criticisms she always expresses to her fellow activists who cite discussions on SNSs is that "you are reproducing the hardships that the lower class always faces with in voicing its requirements, while a social activist is supposed to eradicate this deprivation." Interviewee 4 noted that the activists who "immigrated" to SNSs are becoming ignorant of the sufferings of people who have no voice on these online platforms; for instance, working class women who "do not care about women's participation in the political structure, but worry instead about their own economic situation." Interviewee 8 brought to light an ongoing discussion among women's rights activists over the issues of the compulsory hijab:

I believe the demands that are being discussed on these spaces [SNSs] are to some extent working against reality. You can consider the compulsory hijab as an example. In recent years, some activists who gain their knowledge of society from SNSs are seriously following up on this cause. But those of us who are in touch with different groups of society, for example, through our workshops, know that there are more critical issues which should be addressed first. For instance,

enhancing women's living situation by advancing laws about divorce and child custody. Well, now we can see that there are many arguments over the issue of hijab. They ask us why we do not co-operate with them on this issue. We tell them that this is not the priority. They blame us for being conservative. We blame them for being unrealistic.

As Theme Four depicted, the concerns regarding the threatening impact of individual employment of SNSs on the network of activism were widespread amongst all generations of interviewed activists. To be discussed in the following discussion section is that the evidence of this study supports the argument that social media can promote 'slacktivism' by fostering narcissism and distracting activists from collective commitments. As Interviewee 3 expressed:

The phony popularity that these activists receive on SNSs makes them ignorant of the necessity of collective actions. They have forgotten that, throughout the existence of the movement, the real changes have been achieved by offline collective organization. I am very much looking forward to seeing the time that they get disillusioned with these networks and get back to their real groups.

6.5 Discussion

This chapter explored how more than a decade-long utilization of cyberspace has affected the characteristics of women's rights activism's internal relations. As shown in Chapter 3, nearly all the studies suggested the within-activism contributions and limitations of the Internet, either as a general technology or as the result of a single online platform. Trere (2012) acknowledged this problem, noting that: "The main consequence of the one-medium bias for the study of online activism is that it can reduce the complexity of the Internet to just one of its comprising technologies or to certain particular portions of this complex environment" (p. 2362). The examination of the Iranian case in this study provides the grounds for comprehending the evolution of the impacts of the Internet that has been brought about by the utilization of e-mail groups, websites, and SNSs.

Websites and SNSs serve activists' external outreach, while e-mail groups add a further communication opportunity for women's rights activists' internal relations. E-mail groups have been the key Internet technology utilized for dialogue, decision-making, and action organizing among and within activist groups. The first three themes of this chapter suggest that for women's

rights activism, the more conventional types of Internet technologies, e-mail groups and websites, improve three aspects of activists' internal relations highlighted in the theoretical and empirical studies: communication and organization, within and among activist groups, and participation of individual activists. The final theme, however, showed that the growth of activists' personal SNSs profiles has reverse impacts on activists' internal relations. This theme provides empirical evidence for skeptical arguments, especially around so-called slacktivism.

E-mail groups enhance women's rights activism's capacity to involve activists who might otherwise be absent in decision-making processes. While in the literature the potential of the Internet to transcend geographical limitations is widely illustrated through transnational activist groups (e.g. Zapatista: Clark, 2006; Anti MAI activism: Ayres, 1999; Deibert, 2000; Anti-corporate globalization activism: Bennet, 2003; Juris, 2005), this research provides a pervasive national case which has substantially invested in this potential. Iranian women's rights activism is dispersed across several provinces of the country, which have their particular female publics with a variety of demands. As well, a considerable number of women's rights activists settle in Western countries and wish to contribute their experiences and knowledge to the prosperity of their compatriot women. The e-mail groups construct connection bridges for women's rights activists who had been traditionally limited to contact with local activists.

In addition, e-mail-groups eliminate the financial costs that are associated with the groups' offline meetings. The women's rights informal groups and independent NGOs operate with limited budgets and use online communication to prevent this constraint from weakening their internal relations. Also, when the women's rights movement is under tight control and on-the-ground space for interaction is restricted by the authorities, activists benefit from these online communication channels to circumvent the security costs associated with their personal meetings. While due to the constraints of cost and the state control, offline meetings have been limited to the attendance of high-profile activists and key members of the groups, online meetings, by contrast, have allowed for the participation of a younger generation of activists.

The interviews provide no evidence to suggest that when women's rights groups use e-mail technology for internal communication, they struggle with any of the three challenges that, according to Nielsen's (2009) empirical research, may be entailed by the low cost of online communication among activists: overcommunication, miscommunication, and communicative overload. The absence of these negative consequences is most probably related to the tendency

of women's rights groups to apply e-mail technology in collective form. Also, contrary to the activist groups examined by Nielsen, the women's rights groups do not implicate other forms of online communication, such as websites and SNSs for the distribution of internal messages. Utilizing e-mail groups as a mere online platform for distributing internal messages prevents the publication of identical messages – and thus also the problem of overcommunication; eliminates the dissonance between different online mediums – preventing the danger of miscommunication; and reduces the number of contacts generated from numerous means of internal communication – thus avoiding communicative overload.

By giving voice to geographically dispersed and young activists, e-mail groups provide the activism with a greater diversity of viewpoints. For women's rights groups, elucidation of this diversity has not resulted in difficulty in reaching consensus or the tendency to split (see Clark & Themudo, 2006). On the contrary, the comparison of different views on these virtual meeting spaces bridges the differences within physically disconnected activists and boosts the outcome of decision-making. The e-mail groups owe this success to the consent of high-profile and leading activists in allowing younger and local ones challenge their perspectives. This consent is related to the fact that contemporary women's rights campaigns and coalitions, including but not limited to, those named in this study, did not exhibit a strong leadership structure, as they were mostly led by a steering committee. Furthermore, the women's rights NGOs and informal groups named in this research, or to which interviewed activists were affiliated, enjoy no or very few organizational levels. Thus, this research adds to scholars' previous discussion on the ability of the Internet to promote non-hierarchical activist groups (Bennett, 2003; Surman & Reilly, 2003) by suggesting that there is also a vice versa relationship: that non-hierarchical organizational form facilitates Internet adoption for more collective and democratic decision-making.

The culture of co-operation is also evident across the entire network of women's rights groups. The women's rights movement is constructed by NGOs and informal groups advocating collaboration and networking rather than separation and competition. It is this culture and the tendency to build coalitions and partnerships that make e-mail groups and websites effective tools in facilitating interactivity across the activism network. As Surman and Reilly (2003) pointed out, networked technologies can provide a platform in which civil organizations can work together. They, however, do not offer “the skills or culture necessary to make online collaboration work” (p. 25).

Benefiting from women's rights groups' enthusiasm for collaboration, e-mail groups are vital in planning and co-ordinating joint actions, as well in keeping participant activists abreast of plans. The array of activist groups' websites is not used directly for the coordination of coalitions. However, by offering two possibilities, they are nonetheless important elements of interactivity across the activism network. Firstly, Simi and Futrell (2006) noted that "over the past decade, activists and organizations have emphasized the development of the movement's web presence precisely for the purpose of providing new channels of access to other movement groups, members, and cultural items" (p. 117). In line with this notion, this chapter revealed that websites provide groups with the possibility of identifying others with similar interests who might otherwise be unknown to them. The respondents' statements that the familiarity of the women's rights groups with each other opens the prospect for future collaboration correspond to the notion by Surman and Reilly (2003) that the understanding of a common purpose and culture is vital for a successful collaboration. Secondly, by exchanging symbolic items, such as logos and video clips, and publishing shared content, the websites exhibit solidarity amongst women's rights groups organizing or supporting a coalition. Over the recent years, they have served as tools for manifesting the width and power of women's rights coalitions.

This chapter demonstrated that the array of activist websites shares knowledge across the network of women's rights groups and individuals. While scholars overwhelmingly studied the knowledge building potential of activists' online spaces for public audiences and participants, the consequences of these spaces for knowledge-building among activists remain understudied. The case of this research suggests that, aside from affecting the public awareness, the content of activist groups' websites also enhances the knowledge of member and non-member activists. Moreover, behind these websites are teams of activists who improve their personal capabilities by practicing new technical and media skills, which are required for web management.

The chapter provides empirical evidence for the line of theoretical inquiry that asks to what extent the Internet promotes collective identity among social actors that can result in the formation of collective actions. The interview and observational findings make it clear that collective identity according to Melucci's (1996, pp. 70-71) definition ('interactive and shared definition' constructed through network of active relationships among actors) is reinforced by more conventional forms of online communication, e-mail groups and websites. The e-mail groups create a virtual network for more regular discussions over "the ends, means, and field" (p.

70) of the real-world actions of women's rights activism. They provide the ground for "mutual recognition" (Melucci, 1995, p. 45) between activists who, conventionally, had little contact opportunities. Websites inform the activists of different women's rights groups about each other's causes and objectives, and e-mail groups facilitate the negotiation over different aspects of their collectivity. Meanwhile, by sharing symbolic content, websites demonstrate, and encourage the unity of activist groups and individuals involved in the women's rights movement's campaigns and coalitions.

The success of these two forms of online technologies in promoting collectivity can be also explained by Diani's (2000) notion that virtual networks operate at their best in the promotion of collectivity when they are backed by real social linkages. The virtual networks, built through women's rights activists' e-mail groups and websites, are affiliated with real-world groups that govern decision-making and organizing processes. It is evident, through the observational analysis of the campaign cases and the interviews, that women's rights groups use digital media more as a means of 'managing participation and coordinating goals' rather than 'inviting self-organization of action' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). For these groups, the deployment of online communication has not resulted in the emergence of what was defined by Bennett and Segerberg (2012) as 'connective actions'- technologically organized action with no or loose organizational linkages around a personalized interpretation of problems. The notion promoted by Diani (2000) is most evident in the following quote from Interviewee 2:

When the groups had no possibility to plan actions - for instance, during Ahmadinejad's government - even the Internet could not break this stagnation. The virtual spaces have been only effective in supporting activities when the cause that they promoted had been raised by women's civil groups, like NGOs. For us, the Internet has never been the creator of an action.

This chapter's findings raise concerns about the fact that by encouraging individualism and an interest in gaining personal popularity, activists' individual SNSs profiles can threaten the activism's collective identity. The collective network, which has been underpinned by an array of women's rights groups' websites and e-mail lists, can be entangled in tensions arising from the growth of individual online social networking activities. As Trere (2012) pointed out, this finding "reminds us that future scholars must take particular care not to fall prey to fascination

with the newest online applications ... and avoid the trap of the attractiveness of the latest, cutting-edge applications for activism” (p. 2372).

Skoric and Poor (2013) proclaimed that the comprehension of slacktivism lacks a defensible basis, since most of the literature about slacktivism is merely commentary and not founded on data. The findings presented in the fourth theme about SNSs provide empirical evidence for two lines of argumentation among existing theories about slacktivism. First, it was referred to by Morozov (2009) and Breuer and Farooq (2012) that in slacktivism the primary focus is shifting from contributing to the achievement of a public good to the persuasion of “selfish and narcissistic” objectives. This notion particularly ties in with the case of this research. While e-mail groups facilitate debates for finding mutual solutions, SNSs serve as a stage on which individual women’s rights activists act to promote the legitimacy of their own perspective. While the activist websites manifest the groups’ and the activism collective achievements, the existence of personal profiles on SNSs make it possible for some activists to promote their personal activities to – as Breuer & Farooq (2012) put it – gain social prestige.

Second, the claim made by scholars like Morozov, (2009), Lee and Hsieh (2013), and Skoric and Poor (2013), that low-cost and low-risk online activities encourage previously active activists to pull out of real civic actions, finds evidence in the usage of SNSs by women’s rights activists. The interviewees’ testimonies suggest that since 2009, activist groups have lost the active participation of some of their members who decided to remain active on social media and not get back to on-the-ground activities more likely to get them in personal trouble. Concerns were also raised in that, by devoting a substantial portion of their time in capturing the attention of their online audiences, some of activists, in particular young ones, are distracted from their collective commitments. Whether or not such least effort-consuming digital activities have been ineffective in acquiring real changes in policies – as Christensen (2011) and Skoric (2012) posed - remains an open question.

The previous chapter illustrated the promises of SNSs for individual activists to make direct and unlimited contributions to the public communication practices of the activism. This chapter suggests that activists should take advantage of this opportunity with caution in order to avert backlash in their groups. In recent years, there have been conflicts within activist groups over the power that individual activists have gained through these sites in disseminating information. Thus, with respect to SNSs, this study reaffirms the notion suggested by Surman and Reilly

(2003) that by de-centralizing the power over content, the Internet has created new tensions within civil organizations. This study, however, differs from the argument made by these authors in the sense that for women's rights groups, the struggle is not about which level of organization hierarchy has the right to publish information; rather it is concerned with any member who publishes information that can be identified by readers as a group's collective information.

Finally, the Iranian case of this research provides a noteworthy and distinctive finding. The Internet, in particular SNSs, as the main online media for hearing the public voice, has formed, seemingly, a division amongst women's rights activists over prioritizing women's demands. This division is a reflection of the inequalities in Internet access and usage patterns by the public, which widely caught the attention of activists and, as will be shown in the next chapter, the journalists interviewed in this study.

CHAPTER 7

ACTIVISM ON THE NET: THE RESONANCE OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS ISSUES IN THE IRANIAN PRESS

This chapter addresses the third research question seeking to explore the impact of activists' online media on the resonance of women's rights issues in the print media. It draws upon the interview data with both sides of the story, that of activists and that of print media journalists. The findings are presented via two overarching interview themes. The first holds the notion that the level to which activists' online efforts influence the print media agenda is indeterminable and unsteady due to a dependence on factors which are particular to Iran's media environment and the activism's characteristics. Aside from the magnitude of the influence manipulated by the factors explained in the first theme, the second theme reveals three mechanisms through which activists' online media has become effective in resonating women's rights discourse in the press agenda. The analyzed testimonies by both groups of respondents concentrated on the impacts of the activists' public communication platforms, websites, and SNSs. Some prominent activists who had established relations with the press pointed at the use of e-mail technology for their correspondence with journalists. However, apart from such peer-to-peer applications, neither the journalists nor the activists asserted experiences suggesting that e-mail communication has had any significant and evident influence on the print media agenda.

7.1 Theme One: Factors which manipulate the influence of activists' online media in the press agenda

When asked about effects of activists' online media on print media coverage of women's rights issues, most of the interviewed journalists and a number of interviewed activists complemented their answers by drawing a broader picture of the situation. The analysis of their testimonies discloses two factors affecting the rise and fall of women's rights issues in the Iranian print media; and consequently the success of activists' online media to exert influence on the press agenda: (a) press readiness to covering women's rights issues; and (b) the dynamism of women's rights' activism on the ground.

7.1.1 Press readiness to covering women's rights issues

The interview analysis reveals that in a situation in which the state restricts what can be covered in the press, the level to which activists' online media can exert an agenda-building influence is dependent on how much the press is allowed to open up women's rights issues. Interviewees raised the point that since freedom for the expression of women's rights discourse has been ever-changing under different administrations – something also illustrated in Chapter 2 – accordingly, the press has had varying degree of readiness to resonate the activists' issues⁴⁹.

Interviewee J6 stated very strongly right at the outset of the interview that “one should not investigate the reflection of women's demands [in the print media] without considering the social and political situation in which the press acts.” She noted that women have had a varying portion of the country's media within different administrations. “Those [administrations] who accepted women's rights as a national demand had a closer relation with activists and NGOs. Thus, newspapers had more chances to talk about women's issues.” Interviewee J1 raised the case of *Zanan* (Women) journal, among the most prominent platforms for the women's right movement (see Chapter 2, Sections 2.2), to clarify different governments' standpoints toward the activism. She explained that *Zanan* magazine gained its license under the Rafsangani administration, reached its peak during the Khatami administration, was banned by Ahmadinejad's, and after seven years was authorized to resume printing under the Rouhani administration. “What happened to *Zanan* was because the Khatami and Rouhani administrations look at women's rights issues as social and national demands. While for Ahmadinejad, women's rights activists were threat to national security.”

The impact of the alternating viewpoint of governments on the presence of women's rights demands on the press was further illustrated by Interviewee J3, who exemplified the demand of women employment in public managerial posts:

Administrations like that of Rouhani consider women's employment in managerial posts to have a key and serious national appeal. The press publishes more reports about this issue. Therefore, the Internet plays a more substantial role

49 Although press freedom in Iran has been notably affected by a conservative judiciary, which has a representative in the Press Supervisory Board and is the main power over the press jury, as explained in Chapter 2, presidential administrations also hold a great role in freedom of the press. The Minister of Culture, for example, is the Chairman of the Press Supervisory Board which grants licenses to publications. The Minister also has a vote in the selection of a press jury examining offenses attributed to the press.

in finding related news and debates. For sure, if a hardliner was elected [instead of Rouhani], we would not have such freedom to cover the case.

The obstacle of government control on the press agenda was also reinforced by interviewed activists. Interviewee 9 recalled the ever-existing conflict between the state and women's rights activists, saying: "That is why newspapers can more freely reflect the debates of activist groups like environmental organizations, but they get into difficulties when talking about women's rights groups." When the researcher asked if she thinks the activist online sites that she knows of have strengthened activists' voice in the press or not, Interviewee 4 cautiously replied: "We are not talking about a unique media space. There were eras in which activists had a very close relationship with the press and there were those that we had no access to traditional media." She emphasized that "if someone says that the activists' websites have not increased their influence on the newspapers, I will say I am not sure if this is due to press censorship or Internet ineffectiveness". A number of other interviewed activists remarked the difficulties of accessing press due to state control when they were explaining the ability of their websites to bypass press restriction (see Chapter 5, Section 5.1).

While the major source of concern for respondents was state-imposed restrictions, a number of testimonies indicated that press concentration on political subjects was another factor limiting activists' power to push their issues into the print media. Interviewee J4 explained that the majority of newspapers in Iran are owned by political figures from both the reformist and conservative factions. He noted that a very limited number of newspapers and journals are published by professional media graduates. This explanation helps understand the point that was brought up by Interviewee J7, who expressed that the concentration of most Iranian newspapers on political issues makes women's issues underreported because women make up a smaller portion of the country's politics. "The editors say we need to increase our audiences. For readers, political topics, which are mostly about men, are more attractive. In this situation, women-related topics will definitely receive less coverage." An interviewed activist also raised this problem, but from a different perspective. Interviewee 11 explained that, routinely, women's rights activists raise their voice through reformist and moderate newspapers. She, however, complained of the problem that "even the reformist press perceive women's demands as a political dispute and analyze the costs and benefits of entering such disputes. Certainly, some of our demands, like a

bigger share in governmental posts, are related to politics but they are not any political dispute as such.”

Related to this line of argumentation was the notion held by some of interviewees that the presence of female journalists in the editorial boards of the press increases coverage of women’s rights issues. Interviewee J6 and J1 provided the most comprehensive explanations for this factor. Interviewee J6 stated: “I think if we consider that the Internet has been successful in the amplification of women’s voice in the press, we should not ignore its concurrency with the growth of women journalists.” She said that a few years before women’s rights activists started using the Internet to have their voices heard, “a very precious event” happened in the Iran media sphere: “Journalism became extremely popular among female students. Therefore, during the Reform Era, a new generation of female journalists entered the press. Many of them reached the position of news editor.” This respondent noted that such an increase in the number of female journalists even resulted in the formation of associations focusing on women’s media activities⁵⁰. According to Interviewee J1, the presence of women in the editorial boards of the press makes news being looked at also from a feminine perspective. Additionally, it let more women-related news flow into the press agenda, an assertion supported by the experiences of an interviewed activist, Interviewee 7: “All these years, I have worked with many female journalists. Definitely, we have higher access to journals with female editors.” Interviewee J1 explained that during the time of Ahmadinejad, the crackdown on female journalists and their ensuing emigration reduced the number of female editors and publishers. “This while in the current administration, the number of female managing editors has seen a considerable upturn⁵¹.”

7.1.2 Dynamism of women’s rights activism

According to responding journalists, the press inclination for reflecting the activism issues, and thus attention to activists’ online media, is also influenced by the dynamism of activist groups and individuals on the ground. Interviewee J4 asserted that when the activism enters an inactivity status – even though they use online spaces to broadcast their issues – they lose a great part of

50 The Researcher searched for such associations. The prominent ones included the *Anjomane Zanane Rooznamenegare Iran* (Association of Female Journalists), *Anjomane Zan va Resane* (Association of Women and Media), and *Anjomane Zanane Nasher* (Association of Female Publishers).

51 The percentage of female managing editors increased from 10% in 2013 to 40% in December 2016 (Vice President of Women’s Affairs, 2016)

media attention. “On the contrary, you can see that the more they are engaged and operate, the more they receive press attention. For instance, in the months before elections when they presented their demands to candidates or supported women’s candidacy.” Interviewee J7 said when activists follow up on women’s cases on the ground, instead of just reporting them, they give the press more reasons to include their case in their agenda. Interviewee J1 noted that the prominent journals and newspapers she has worked with would cover online issues followed by real world activity. “When we hear that women [activists] have visited MPs or issued letters to officials, we feel that it is our duty to reflect their issues.” She continued:

Unfortunately, these days, many of the women rights discourses on social media have become short-lived discussions. The activists speak about their concerns without following up on them to make them a real public cause of concern. Definitely, such discussions find negligible resonance in the newspapers.

Implicit in the abovementioned quote is an underlying concern also raised by Interviewee J6. She firmly believed that some activists had misinterpreted their main role. “The social responsibility of an activist is not to broadcast news. This is up to journalists. Their responsibility is chiefly to react to decision-making and events in their fields. This has been overlooked in recent years.” She noted that she was talking about social and political activists in any field, not just women’s rights. This interviewee, who used activists’ online information in her reports at a minimum level compared to that of other interviewed journalists, said this is one of the reasons she rarely uses activists’ online information and works in person with specific women’s rights activists and NGOs involved in real world projects.

The interview analysis shows that offline activities enhancing the activism’s media presentation also includes women rights’ groups’ and coalitions’ strategies and efforts in sourcing and contacting the Iranian press. In response to the probes relating to the third research question, three interviewed activists believed that what is more significant than online activities is having a clear plan for a media relationship. “In many cases, we defined a media strategy. We contacted the chosen newspapers and introduced persons [activists] they could interview,” said Interviewee 5. Interviewee 10 pointed at the meeting with journalists during the campaign in protest to revisions in the Family Protection Law (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2.6; and Chapter 6, Section 6.2), recounting: “We owe our success to raising our voices in the press with such

efforts.” The significance of the activists’ media plan was raised by one interviewed journalist. Interviewee J2 named one of the campaign cases observed in this research, ‘Changing the Parliament’s Male Face/Women for Parliament’⁵². She explained that prominent reformist newspapers – including, but not limited to, *Shargh*, *Bahar*, and *Etemade Melli* – as well as numerous leading news websites, reflected and discussed the campaign’s demands. As one of the journalists who covered this case, she expressed a noteworthy experience:

This [coverage of the campaign by the press] was not after the presence of the campaign on the Internet. We [the journalists] started to reflect on the news after the campaigners held a press conference and a number of meetings with the participation of activists, academics, and journalists. Because then we realized this is a serious cause.

Theme one disclosed that the interaction between women’s rights activists’ online alternative media and the Iranian press should not be seen in vacuum. Such interaction takes place in a particular context of Iran in which the press is not truly independent in choosing the subjects they cover. Having to consider state-defined ‘red lines’, the Iranian print media’s readiness to resonate activists’ issues is greatly determined by governments’ standpoints toward women’s rights discourse. Such readiness also shrinks when the press puts the focus on political disputes, something traditionally perceived as the domain of men. The interviewees’ experiences also suggested that online issues have more opportunities to find their ways into print media when they are accompanied with the efforts of activists on the ground.

7.2 Theme Two: Contributions of activists’ online media to the resonance of their issues in the print media

Aside from the scale of the influence manipulated by factors raised in the previous theme, this theme explains how activists’ online media exerts such on the press agenda. The first sub-theme uncovers the primary mechanism, which is usage of the activists’ online information by print media journalists. The second sub-theme illustrates that the online media also contributes to the spread of women’s rights issues in the press by amplifying women-related reports initially

⁵² As explained in Chapter 4, the interviews with journalists started in April 2016, i.e. two months after the end of the campaign in February 2016.

produced by journalists either online or offline. With regards to the first two sub-themes, the interviewees' testimonies concentrated on the impacts of both websites and SNSs. Specifically, with regards to SNSs, the analysis of the respondents' experiences suggests that users of these sites are becoming influential intermediaries in the interplay between activists and print media. The final sub-theme, which is derived from the journalists' side of the experience, uncovers that the day-to-day articles and analysis published by activist websites can have indirect and more persistent effects on the print media agenda by influencing journalists' awareness and attitude toward the key debates around women's rights.

7.2.1 Journalists' use of information on activists' online media

While two journalists expressed that they hardly consider information which is circulated by activists on the Internet, others spoke of the use of activist websites and SNSs as their potential source of news in the women's field. These journalists' testimonies were mostly about the use of online news and reports on activists' online sites. The analysis of journalists' interviews reveals that the flow of activists' online information into journalists' reports is controlled by the concerns about: (a) credibility and objectivity, and (b) the relative importance and precedence of such information. Despite their enthusiasm for online information gathering, these concerns made Interviewees J1 and J6, the oldest interviewed journalists, dismissive of the activist online spaces as a source of information. Pointing at one or both of these factors, the other five journalists spoke of the use of activists' online information with caution. For them, these factors are the main filters that activists' online information should bypass in order to be resonated in their reports. After these factors are outlined, this sub-theme notes a significant result about the way journalists make use of activists' online information.

Concerns for credibility and objectivity

Interviewee J6, among the most prominent and experienced of Iranian newspaper reporters, was the most critical of the accuracy of online news. She clarified at the beginning of her interview that she never used online information produced by people and social actors about a social phenomenon, as she believed such information is far from what she has always known to be credible information. "There is no gate keeping on these spaces. I'd rather stick to my traditional sources of information." Interviewee J1 questioned the "accuracy and objectivity" of the activists' online information and that this was why such information is rarely reflected in her

reports. She explained that “formal online spaces” like news agencies and officials’ websites are her regular sources of news and that she never trusts those “online spaces which do not take responsibility for the accuracy of their information.”

For the other interviewed journalists, this concern has not entirely devalued activists’ online reports. It was evident in their statements that they think of the Internet as less credible than their offline sources. Nonetheless, by applying validity measures, they use activists’ online broadcasted cases to get ideas for their news stories. Interviewee J2 noted:

I think as a journalist I should consider any issue that they [the activists] raise on the Internet as raw data, and start researching about them to see whether they are real or otherwise are the result of activists’ subjective realization of the situation.

She exemplified the case of child marriage in the rural areas of Iran. “The activists raised the alarm that the rate of child marriage in villages is concerning, and that the officials are ignorant of this problem.” She narrated that the importance of the issue encouraged her to embark on an inquiry with related bodies. Her investigations found that the activists were right. “As they warned, the rate was alarming. I was persuaded to prepare a comprehensive report on it.” Interviewee J3 said: “In our newspaper, we never trust online news and statistics that are spread by any other online sources than official news agencies. In many cases, we found the women’s rights activists’ information wrong.” He believed such invalid reports are particularly spread by activists in exile “because they are detached from the realities of the society, which cannot be explored without real observation, and because they often have unreliable sources.”

Three interviewed journalists compared activist websites and SNSs profiles in terms of their credibility of online information. They firmly considered the websites as being a more valid newsgathering source. “The websites write things in a more journalistic way. They often have administrators who check the validity of the contents,” said Interviewee J3. Interviewee J5 said: “If a website publishes false information, all group members have to take responsibility. This is not the case with social media.” (See Chapter 5, Section 5.4 for interviewed activists’ discussion of the same problem.) She exemplified many fake stories spread on SNSs about domestic violence. “Many such stories do not make sense. Some of them are even written on very popular activist profiles.” Interviewee J7 remarked that the fast-paced news generation in social media makes journalists not trust the credibility of such news.

Concern for precedence and newsworthiness

Six out of seven journalists discussed that reporters and editorial boards of the press select cases from activists' online sites which they assume are valuable and captivating to their readers. They pictured situations in which some women-related online reports, even if they are credible, find no way into print media because they do not take precedence over other social cases.

In this regard, the first line of argumentation centered around SNSs. The previous data analysis chapters presented testimonies of activists who believed that SNSs in Iran hardly echo the voice of lower class and marginalized women (see Chapter 5, Section 5.5 and Chapter 6, Section 6.4.2). Intriguingly, a similar concern was explored from journalist's assertions. Some journalists highlighted that a significant part of the debates on SNSs do not receive newspapers' attention because they do not present the demands of a larger part of society. "We see that much of the subjects reflected by social media are the problem of affluent people," said Interviewee J1. "Issues such as under-18 marriage do not spread on online spaces because they are not the problems of the middle and upper classes." She emphasized that "women's rights movements in most parts of the world were started by the middle class; however, this should not result in only taking into consideration the middle class."

Sharing this view, Interviewee J2 said she does not favor hot topics on activists' social networking sites pages, such as the hijab, over problems she identifies through interaction with the domain: "I and my newspaper ask which issues should be addressed first, the issue of the hijab or the Ilami women⁵³ who escape their living conditions through suicide." She then emphasized: "Undeniably, the living problems of the Ilami women need more attention of the government." The complaint made by Interviewee J6 suggests that not all Iranian journalists care about the subject of their stories as much as Interviewee J2 does:

We should not neglect the importance of real observation. Some of our journalists are so indolent that they find most of their news stories through the Internet. A large part of women's problems in Iran do not find a way into online spaces (the issues of smaller cities, minorities, etc.). They do not bother themselves to explore these subjects and hear the voice of voiceless people.

53 Ilam is the capital of Ilam Province and one of the biggest Kurdish cities in Iran.

The other line of argumentation, according to two interviewed journalists, is that it is the diversity of women's demands in the country, and the lack of a defined set of objectives among women's rights groups, that strengthens journalists' and editors' role in rating the prominence of women's rights issues. "We can hardly find common demands among women's rights activists, contrary to, for instance, environmental activists," said interviewee J2, emphasizing that "when the activists cannot set their priorities, it is the newspapers that decide which demands need more attention." Interviewee J7 noted: "We have to define what the news value is for such subjects [those raised by activist online sites] because the Iranian women's demands are very diverse. We should ask ourselves to what extent our readers are affected by that case."

Two interviewees raised the point that some of the activists' issues have lost their appeal for newspapers and their audiences due to overexposure and repeated reporting. Interviewee J4 maintained: "It happened that we did not publish a report about causes that they [women's rights activists] have in hand because our editors believed that, for many people, the causes were of no more interest." An example of such a perception came from Interviewee J1. She exemplified the case of debates around women's involvement in the political sphere:

It is definitely a crucial issue for activists and elite women. Right! But we cannot expect ordinary women to constantly follow the debates that have been forming around this issue for decades. Ordinary women care more about tangible issues that have relevance to their day-to-day lives, issues like "white marriage"⁵⁴.

Statements by some interviewed journalists and activists uncovered the existence of a factor which can alter the press view of the prominence of cases reported by activists' online media outlets: that of intensive follow-up on such cases by social media users. Interviewee J7 believed that when users get very sensitive about a subject, they make newspapers react. Interviewee J3 recounted: "It happened many times that we did not cover a case at the outset. But a few days later, because it became a very hot topic in social media, we started to run an investigation into the story." While the journalists tried to use terms like 'persuasion' to describe the effect of social media users on their news selection process, the interviewed activists believed that the press is 'forced' to carry coverage of an issue against its initial will because of a sudden explosion of the issue on social media. "Sometimes our [online] reports were so influential on

54 This refers to the growing trend of Iranian young unmarried couples living together.

the users that it forced the traditional media to resonate our debates,” said Interviewee 2. Interviewee 5 noted that in some cases the Iranian press did not wish to cover women-related issues, but when “the issue was spread by users on the Internet ... then word of mouth newspapers had to talk about it because their silence was a sign of their backwardness.” It should be noted that such an impact by social media users was not acknowledged by those interviewed journalists who, as shown earlier, were skeptical of social media as an indicator of case prominence.

Before ending this sub-theme, a significant result of this study about journalists’ usage of activists’ online information should be noted. The five journalists receptive to activists’ online sites as sources of information revealed that they utilize these sources only to the extent of getting news ideas. That is to say, their use of these sites has not gone so far as to provide them with a new source of contacts and investigation. They consider a case brought up by an activist, one which could pass the aforementioned filters, as a possible news subject, and then prepare their reports using their traditional sources. Interviewee J2 supplied the clearest explanation for this trend:

After I make sure about the accuracy of a case noted by these [activists’ online] sites, I start my investigations. I consider the case as a starting point but try to address it in its broader context. I interview MPs and officials. I ask them if they are aware of such cases. What are their plans to address them? Then I contact civil organizations and women’s rights activists. I ask them what their plan is about. What have you done so far? I review related reports. For instance, to prepare a report on child marriage, I tried to find out the divorce rate and maternal death rate among girls married underage.

When asked whether she would contact the activist or organization who raised the case on the Internet, J2 replied: “Not when the organization’s activities do not relate to the case. I prefer to contact those who are responsible or who are conducting efforts or research on the field.” It was revealed in the previous data analysis chapters that women’s rights groups significantly use their online sites to inform the public about the details of their missions and activities. In spite of such information, neither this interviewee nor the other journalists spoke of the use of these online sites as a way to identify new groups and experts who can bring them up date with their coverage.

Interviewee J7 expressed that more than 70% of the links informing her reports were permanent. “I have been working with well-known NGOs and activists. I have known them for many years.” As an example, she described the time when the bill for women’s early retirement was proposed in Parliament⁵⁵. Investigating the case, she contacted women MPs with whom she had regular contact. She also named three prominent women’s rights activists who were regular sources. “I called them to know about their opinion on the impact of the legislation.... I asked if they had made any contacts with MPs.” Interviewee J4 mentioned more explicitly that “the Internet might have affected my reports’ subjects, but not the individuals or organizations I speak to during my investigations.”

The experience of Interviewee 1, among the most known of activists for print media journalists, reinforced the journalists’ testimonies. When asked about the effects of her NGO’s website on the coverage of her efforts by the press, she responded:

As a matter of fact, I cannot see much change. I have been always called by the same journalists like X, Y, etc. The others find me after my meetings with officials in [the Tehran] municipality or police. In some cases, I contact the journalists whom I know myself, when I want to inform people about a problem.

A closer look at the above-mentioned testimonies suggests that print media journalists mainly speak to prominent activists who have longer experience of working with newspapers and are more recognizable in the public eye. This finding is echoed by the testimonies of two young activists who said they did not think that their online presence would provide them with more opportunities of being contacted by journalists because the print media preference is to interview well-known activists. Interviewee 5 explained the journalists who actively write on women’s issues normally have a define set of links within women’s rights groups. To describe this set of activists Interviewee 6 used the term spokespersons: “Because of many years of co-operating with newspapers, they are considered by the press as our spokespersons.”

55 According to the bill, public organizations should accept the early retirement requests of their female employees if they have worked at least 20 years. A few months after the interviews, the bill was withdrawn, citing its financial load on the government and its weakening women’s participation in the country’s economy.

7.2.2 Activists' online media amplify journalists' reports of women's rights cases

This sub-theme came up from both interviewed journalists' and activists' observation that activists' online media has also contributed to spreading women's rights discourse in the press by amplifying journalists' reported cases. It was a common experience among both groups of interviewees that part of the debates around women's rights emerges from cases initially disclosed by print media journalists. An interviewed activist, Interviewee 8, explained: "We regularly monitor newspapers. Some cases that we follow up on are uncovered by newspapers, for instance news of new policy making." On the other side of the story, interviewed journalists raised the same point: Interviewee J1: "In recent years, a number of women-related cases have been reported by journalists that then are followed up on by women's rights activists. They were particularly written by female journalists." Interviewee J4 maintained that: "some cases are initially reported by activists who have access to the field. But some are disclosed by journalists. We [activists and journalists] both use each others' information."

The activist groups and individuals interested in women-related reports in newspapers or journalists' online platforms contribute to its publicity through their online media. Interviewee 4 pointed at the publication of such reports by activist groups' websites: "Not only can our sites be used by newspapers, but newspapers can also feed our websites. A part of the articles that we publish on our websites is derived from newspaper reports on women-related cases." When asked if her group has followed up on the case in the real world, she explained: "There were cases that we followed in our groups, but not always. Look! Even if we don't follow them, because we reflect them on our sites, we will make it a noteworthy case for people and other activists." Interviewee 2 put emphasis on the role of SNSs in such processes:

Today, social media has given journalists the possibility of immediately spreading their news and interpretations. We follow their pages and share their posts, those that are in line with our field of activity.... I follow many journalists, especially on Twitter. If I find relevant posts, I will share them on my own [SNS] pages.

The interview analysis suggested that such interaction between activists' online sites and journalists amplifies journalists' reports and expands their coverage by the press. Interviewee J7 expressed: "The more we present a narration of an issue, the more we have prompted the press to inspect it." Interviewee J4 explained his own experience: "Some of women's [rights] websites

have particular sections for newspaper articles. I am sure these would be read by journalists like me.... Once I read a journalist's report on these [activist] websites and asked myself why I have not worked on this case yet myself?" While Interviewee J6 entirely dismissed the use of activists' online information in her reports, she praised the efforts of women's rights activists in spreading journalists' reports: "When activists and their readers spread our reports, it is like we stick our fingers in the eyes of other newspapers to gain their attention." Among the interviewed activists, Interviewee 5 provided the most explanation of this process:

Look! This is a loop. Journalists' reports penetrate the online world. There, they are read by people who are not newspaper readers. There are many people who do not read newspapers every day but check their Facebook multiple times a day. The issue is repeated in the virtual world. Because of this repetition, it enters traditional media spaces once again and informs a larger part of the public who are not among our online audiences. Therefore, I think our sites and newspapers reinforce each other.

The above quote and experiences expressed by the interviewed journalists provide more evidence for the finding raised in the previous sub-theme that a social media stir can cause journalists' reaction. Interviewee J3 named two main groups of information on SNSs feeding his reports: "news and information" and "people's reaction to news." As regards the latter, he explained: "When our reports are published online, my colleagues and I inspect the public reaction. We find out if the case needs a follow-up or not." Interviewee J5 explained:

Sometimes we covered a case in the form of news on an event page. Later, when it sparked heated debate on social media, we got back to it and scrutinized it. We published more analysis of the case. For example, if it was a case of violence, we published articles about its social and psychological aspects. Therefore, in my opinion when [social media] users get very sensitive about a subject, they make the newspapers expand their coverage.

Interviewee J7 recounted a recent case to clarify this interplay between journalists and online media. She said that after newspapers published reports about the parliament-government discussion over the women's early retirement bill, the case soon found its way into the Internet

by a number of women's rights websites. "The controversy⁵⁶ that emerged amongst activists and people over its impacts was so great that it made us react fast. For example, we conducted interviews with MPs who approved and disapproved of the bill." Testimonies by Interviewees J3 and J5 shows that such online stirrings not only push journalists to expand their reports but also feed their interviews with officials. "In recent times, a very common trend is to ask officials about public reactions to a case that is disclosed either by us or by activists [on the Internet]," said Interviewee J5. Interviewee J3 asserted: "We tell officials that people have got worried about this situation. What is your response to them? Or we ask them about backlashes among activists, scholars, or experts."

7.2.3 Activists' online articles affect journalists' knowledge and attitudes towards women's rights

A significant finding of this study is that the effects of activists' online sites on the print media agenda do not merely emerge from online-offline spillover, as was the case with the two previous mechanisms. This sub-theme suggests that the increased availability of analytical articles on the different aspects of women's rights, thanks to online communication channels, can inspire a change in the print media agenda by influencing journalists' knowledge and attitudes towards women's rights.

A common experience among a majority of the interviewed journalists was that of newspapers rarely publishing or citing activists' online articles because opinion pieces in the press are routinely written by guest writers, including prominent women's rights activists. In spite of this trend, five out of the seven journalists emphasized that they regularly read the activists' opinions and research on their websites. The female journalists paid more attention to the usefulness of such articles for obtaining a coherent analysis of women's rights issues and their context. Interviewee J7 explained:

A very notable impact of the articles that activists produce on their sites is that they raise journalists' knowledge and understanding of different cases pertaining to women. They are experts in their fields. They have done studies and field

⁵⁶ The pivotal issue was that middle class women would bear the brunt of lowering the age of retirement because they prioritize progress and occupational promotion. Therefore, they would feel the harmful consequences of this piece of legislation. Meanwhile, lower class women who lose their lives under the burden of employment, housework, and child care may see this bill as a good opportunity.

works. So their analysis of situations sheds light on aspects we might fail to notice.

This journalist emphasized that she does not directly reflect the viewpoints of activists in her own reports, only that such reading has influenced her perspective when she investigates a women-related case. Examples of such an impact came from Interviewee J2, who said activists had published numerous articles on their websites about the importance of women's organizations to realize and expose women's demands. "These articles notified me about the influence of such organizations on policy-making," she said. "So, in some pieces of legislation, I paid more attention to the roles of these organizations." Interviewee J5, meanwhile, focused on activists' research and groundwork.

Some of the activists are conducting very promising research projects and even journalistic investigations which impressed me a lot! For instance, the articles they publish about the effect of war on women in Syria and Iraq. I remember a few months ago, one of these websites dedicated an issue of its monthly online magazine to different aspects of women and war.

When asked if reading this online magazine persuaded her to prepare a report on women and war herself, she said: "No. I did not follow the subject. But it did raise my awareness."

It is apparent that for male journalists, Interviewees J3 and J4, the impact of reading activists' online items has gone beyond gaining assistance in the comprehension of women's rights issues. They spoke of a more profound influence on their mindset towards not only women's rights issues but also the activists themselves. Interviewee J4 remarked that "for me, the greatest impact of women's websites was that they gave me sensitivity about the women's rights debate." He maintained: "I understood that their debates are around social problems, something which requires me, as a journalist, to think about them more seriously." Interviewee J3 recounted that some years ago, when there were much less writing and analysis of women's issues, he had a very limited understanding of women's rights. "Now I know how broad this field is and that it encompasses a wide range of demands." He said, for instance, that he understood that activist groups follow cases other than just those involving discriminatory laws, such as the empowerment of employed women in underprivileged cities, and giving legal assistance to victims of domestic violence and imprisoned women.

The male journalists' experiences underline interviewed activists' statements about the promises of their websites for boosting the public image of the activism (see Chapter 5, Section 5.1.1). Their testimonies also echo the statement expressed by one of the interviewed activists: "The pace of spreading the egalitarian dialectic was increased by women's websites. This turned many male journalists to our proponents. They started to spread this dialectic as one which would benefit both sexes," said Interviewee 10.

7.3 Discussion

Drawing upon interviews with Iranian journalists and activists, this chapter provided an understanding of the influence of women's rights activists' online media on the Iranian press agenda. This section outlines the main findings of the chapter and discusses them with respect to the related body of literature presented in Chapter 3 (section 3.1.2).

The first theme introduced factors which can influence the inter-media agenda-setting power of the activism's online media: (a) press readiness to include women's rights issues in their agenda, and (b) the dynamism of the activism. This interview theme supports the Pfetsch and Adam (2011) assertion that the online-offline dynamic is context-sensitive. It provided in particular empirical evidence for the influence of offline media outlets, country characteristics; as well as issue characteristics on the online-offline spillover process, properties of which have been explained by these authors.

This study confirms that, as Pfetsch and Adam foreshadowed, the openness of the receiving media outlet influences the likelihood of spill-over. However, in the Iranian media system, such openness is not only defined by editorial orientation or "political leaning of the media outlet" (p. 11), but, to a more significant degree, by state control on the mainstream press. Country characteristics, therefore, become influential. In a context such as Iran, with its controlled media system, the impact of political structure on the online-offline dynamic should be seen not only from the perspective of the "openness of political structure toward challengers" (p.12), but should also be examined in terms of the relation between political structure and mainstream media. In Iran, it is also the state control on the mainstream media that affects the spillover from activists' online sites to the press. As demonstrated in this chapter, the online-offline spillover of women's rights issues is more likely when the press is not restricted by the state to reflect upon women's rights debates. With regard to issue characteristics, the case of this research supports Pfetsch and Adam's anticipation that the issue fields in which challengers are active have a

higher chance to be reflected by the media. When women's rights activism entered an inactivity mode in the offline realm, it was given less of a presence in the media agenda, in spite of having significant online activity. As Pfetsch et al. (2016) explained: "The rise of an issue through communication is dependent on collective movement actors putting resources into the fight for the cause" (p. 50).

The second overarching theme revealed that activists' online sites advance the inclusion of women's rights issues in the print media agenda through three processes. First and foremost, the spillover of activists' online information into Iranian print media reports, when journalists make use of activists' online news and case specific reports in order to get ideas for news subjects. In accordance with earlier empirical studies (Casero-Ripolles & Feenstra, 2012; Lester & Hutchins, 2009; Mico & Ripones, 2014), this investigation shows that the selection of activists' online information by print media journalists occurs in the case of women's rights activism. It is a process, however, that is restricted by journalists' concern about the credibility and objectivity of activists' online reports and the prominence and newsworthiness of their cases. Compared to the former concern, which is definitely not particular to the Iranian context, the second concern is more associated with the characteristics of Iranian women's rights activism. When issues addressed by women's rights activists are varied and there is no agreement over demand priorities, print media journalists and editors have more power to define the prominence of activists' issues.

This chapter exposed a noteworthy finding: Despite the concern that SNSs are not representative of the totality of Iranian society, the online stir created on these sites is influential upon journalists' reports. All three data analysis chapters exposed a very recurrent assertion that SNSs in Iran marginalize the voice of the lower class in favor of the middle and upper. However, this chapter illustrated that it has become a trend among journalists and the press to measure the newsworthiness of their cases with social media users' reaction. While applying such measures can increase the resonance of women's related cases in the Iranian press – as suggested by some interview testimonies in this chapter - it remains an open question that if it can contribute to the further marginalization of social groups absent on social media.

The analysis of activists and journalists' responses reveals that activists' self-presentation on the Internet has not evidently affected journalists' sources of contacts and investigation. For the journalists interviewed in this study, activists' online information impacted the subject of their

reports without entailing any evident change in their investigation process. Like journalists in Jha's (2007, 2008) studies, these journalists preferred to stick to their traditional informants, mainly high-profile activists. This chapter cannot conclude that all Iranian journalists are resistant to the use of activists' online sites to identify new informants. However, the absence of such evidence in this study is noteworthy as the interviews were conducted with journalists from seven prominent Iranian newspapers. Additionally, the activists' side of the experience conveyed the same result. The studies as such can complement the examinations by public relations practitioners who have examined activists' deployment of their webpages in building a relationship with conventional media journalists (e.g. Reber & Kim, 2006). While Chapter 5 uncovered women's rights activists' efforts in increasing their public visibility through their websites and SNSs, this chapter shows that this opportunity is not well exploited by print media journalists.

This study also revealed a second process through which activists' online platforms act as an agenda-builder in the women's rights field: When activists reflect and/or follow journalists' reports on their online sites, they contribute to the amplification of activism's related issues in the print media. Also, activists' and social media users' reactions to a publicized case persuade the publication of follow-up reports. The interview analysis suggests that the activism and print media have had mutual agenda-building impacts. It was not only the activists who could affect media agenda, but on many other occasions, activists followed a case initially broadcasted by journalists of print media. When activists' online sites in harmony with their social media users echo these cases, they capture the attention of more journalists.

The third identified influence of activists' online media on the press bears evident signs of a longer term change in the relationship between women's rights activists and journalists of print media. It was revealed that besides affecting journalists' knowledge, activists' online opinion articles can leave a more profound impact on journalists' mindset toward women's rights issues. These articles can create a sensibility for journalists, who are mentally detached from women's rights discourse. In the case of this study, this effect was particularly witnessed in male journalists. They considered reading activists' online information as a determinant factor in gaining interest to covering women's rights issues. Through her empirical study, Jha (2008) claimed that journalists' attitudes and dispositions towards movements may affect the democratizing impact of the Internet on print media. The final sub-theme in this chapter suggests

that the impact is not one way, but mutual. The attitude of journalists toward activist groups can be enhanced by the awareness-building power of activists' online media, which can, consequently, increase journalists' coverage of activists' online and offline issues.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

This thesis began with a key concern: to explore how the Internet has affected Iranian activists. It has concentrated on women's rights activism, among the most prominent and dynamic activist circles in the country. It contributes to a growing body of critical research on Internet-mediated communication for activism, in which countries like Iran with their own social and political particularities have been insufficiently examined. The three data analysis chapters of this thesis have provided empirical findings in response to three research questions directing the investigation of this research on women's rights activists: (1.) How has Internet utilization affected the activism's public communication? (2.) How has Internet utilization affected the activism's internal relations? and (3.) How has the activists' online media affected the resonance of women's rights issues in the traditional Iranian press? This concluding chapter will not summarize all these findings again, as was done in the previous chapters' discussion sections. Instead, it sheds light on the implications of these new findings for theory, practice, and future research. It also highlights the main limitations of this study.

8.1 Theoretical Implications

The discussion sections in the data analysis chapters discussed the findings of this study in light of previous ones. This concluding chapter takes the contribution to the existing knowledge one level further. Aggregating the findings of the promises and pitfalls of Internet deployment for women's rights activists' public communication, internal relations, as well as for their media presentation, this section provides insights on the grand theories that were denoted in the theoretical framework chapter to help understand the conceptual framework of the study, namely: (a) social movements' opportunity structure, framing process, and mobilization structure; and (b) agenda-setting and agenda-building.

8.1.1 Social movements' opportunity structure, framing process, and mobilization structure

Despite the fact that opportunity structure, framing process, and mobilization structure have been widely referenced in the social movement literature (see e.g. McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996), very few empirical studies have openly discussed the relationship between these

components of the social movement paradigm and the Internet. The results of this study have implications for the understanding of this relationship, particularly in terms of social movements operating in a transitional political context with a constant closing and opening of the civil society.

The opportunity structure, in particular political opportunity, for social movements within the Iranian context is more dynamic and less predictable compared to societies benefitting from more autonomy of civil society, and more stable policies toward democratic entities. For instance, as explained in Chapter 2, women's rights activists experienced the most serious crackdowns on their activities by the Ahmadinejad administration, after they had gained unprecedented ground for resisting, bargaining, and pressing for women's rights during the Reform Era of Khatami's presidency. In such a political context, the consequences of the Internet for social movements in terms of opportunity structure can be viewed from two perspectives. First, online communication assists in circumventing periodical restrictions imposed by the political structure. Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrated how the Internet moderated the impacts of crackdown on the activists' public and internal communication, especially during the two terms of Ahmadinejad's presidency. Women's rights activists deploy the Internet to maintain their communication line with the Iranian people when press freedom is restricted, and to protect their internal network when face-to-face meetings entail high security costs. Second, the ability to bypass state and press regulations over the flow of information causing a more independent framing process can generate a longer-term enhancement of the opportunity structure. Although the Internet itself is not free from government control, it has provided Iranian women's rights activists with an alternative media to spread frames about their causes, objectives, and activities more independently and frequently. It has enabled them to challenge frames describing them and their issues wrongly; those that were either developed by their opponent within the state to downplay their legitimacy or were created by people due to a lack of access to reliable information sources about such activism. This has offered the women's rights movement three possibilities that can enhance the environment for its activities, and therefore its opportunity structure: (a) creating greater societal awareness of the activism and its issues (see Chapter 5, Section 5.1-5.3); (b) moderating politicians' antagonistic attitudes and behavior toward women's rights demands and towards the activists themselves(see Chapter 5, Section 5.1.2); and (c)

influencing journalists' knowledge and viewpoints toward women's rights discourse (see Chapter 7, Section 7.2.3).

Whether the Internet is deployed as a replacement to the activists' restricted offline meeting venues or is utilized as a complement to their face-to-face interactions, it aids the mobilization structure of the women's rights movement and its participant groups. The first aspect of mobilization structure in McCarthy's (1996) well-cited definition of mobilization structure, presented in Chapter 3, is concerned with the mechanism of engagement in collective actions. At the movement level, websites and e-mail groups stimulate interactivity and collectivity among women's rights groups. Over the past decade, through their websites, the activist groups have identified each other with common objectives, paving the way for future collaboration and coalitions. In addition, e-mail groups have played a key role in planning and coordinating coalitions and partnerships between the movement actors. At the level of activist groups, such e-mail groups have facilitated collective decision-making with the participation of more individual activists, including previously excluded geographically dispersed and young activists.

This study's investigation of the way women's rights activists have utilized Internet communication suggests that the activist groups' websites and SNSs have also affected the second aspect of mobilization structure in McCarthy's (1996) definition: activists' tactical repertoire. A finding emerged in this study supports the argument that the Internet not only supports, but also extends, activists' existing tactics (see Vegh 2003; Van Laer & Van Aelsts, 2010): The Internet has developed the activists' tactic of raising public awareness and support to include activists' self-presentation – for, prior to the advent of the Internet, through the print media, activists could mainly promote only their issues and not themselves. Moreover, for women's rights activists, Internet utilization has gone beyond the extension of existing tactics and has created new action possibilities as well, as indeed was foreshadowed by Wells (2015). Websites and SNSs have been utilized for an action possibility rarely existing in the activists' offline repertoire of action: mobilizing the public for (online) collective action. It should be noted that such mobilization has not been for actions on the ground, but for online actions, such as electronic petitions and online photo campaigns. Therefore, the activists' offline repertoire of action still does not include participation of the mass public. However, since Internet utilization, the activism has started to promote its public support by calling on Internet users to online

collective actions. In line with the non-confrontational nature of the movement, such online actions are persuasive and do not include confrontational tactics, such as virtual sit-ins.

While contributing to the knowledge about the potential of Internet-mediated communication, the results of this study have had significant implications for understanding the unintended consequences of the Internet, specifically individual SNSs profiles, on social movements' framing process and mobilization structure.

Social movement theorists have emphasized that the development of social movements' frames is a contested process between different movement actors who take different positions (e.g. Benford & Snow, 2000; Gamson & Meyer, 1996). Actors in the women's rights movement have different ideological orientations (secular, religious, modern, and traditional) and address demands of women from different social classes and geographical areas. As noted in the Introduction, as a new social movement, the women's rights movement operates through a decentralized and leaderless network of activist groups and individuals. Due to these characteristics, reaching a frame unity and consensus in describing their objectives and priorities is a very challenging task. For this movement, e-mail groups have facilitated negotiation over internal disagreements in defining and describing movement objectives and activities. In addition, websites and social networking sites profiles affiliated with women's rights groups and campaigns have supplied the activism with public platforms to publish the collectively defined frames. However, this study reveals that the activists' individual profiles on SNSs have challenged the movement's framing unity. Through these profiles, some women's rights activists disseminate frames of collective actions which have not been validated by discourse and debates within activist groups. Therefore, the empirical findings of this study raise the possibility that, unlike the frames published through activists' collective online spaces, the movements' frames disseminated through individual activists' SNSs profiles remain as individual interpretations of a movement's actions because they are not built through a discursive, strategic, and contested framing process (see e.g. Benford & Snow, 2000 for discussion of movements framing process). While the literature has focused on Internet opportunities and threats in terms of the flow of movements' frames to the public, by this discussion this study also draws attention to Internet effects on the development of collective frames.

The evidence obtained from this study also suggests that social movements' mobilization structure could be under threat by the growth of individual online social networking activities. It

was revealed that SNSs distract women's rights activists from participation in collective actions by offering them more public recognition and less personal costs. Also on these sites, individual activists tend to put emphasis on their individual gains rather than the activism's collective achievements. Such a trend threatens the activists' collective identity, and consequently their engagement in collective actions.

This thesis contributes to the theoretical debate on ICTs and collective identity as a key element of new social movements' mobilization structure by suggesting that different Internet technologies can entail different impacts on collective identity. For women's rights activism, while e-mail groups and websites foster collaboration, direct and individual channels that personal SNSs profile provide for activists' public communication encourage individualism and damage the sense of unity. Activists' e-mail groups are a means of strategic planning and deliberation. However, their SNSs profiles act as window-dressing: in other words, a lot of ideas but no strategy. Within e-mail groups, negotiation about aspects of the activism take place in private. The aim is to reach convergence and consensus. On the contrary, on individual social networking sites profiles, since the frame contest occurs on a public stage, the principal aim is to promote the legitimacy of personal interpretations and to gain more public recognition. When they are being watched by the public, activists do not negotiate but instead manifest the individual meanings they insert to women's rights activism.

8.1.2 Agenda-setting and agenda-building

This study emphasizes the recent call that the classical agenda-setting theory should be revisited by taking into consideration the contribution of online media in shaping the public agenda (see e.g. McCombs, 2005, 2014; Weimann & Brosius, 2016). The research suggests that in recent years a new landscape for agenda-setting on women's rights issues has been created in Iran. The activists' alternative Internet media has challenged the press power in directing the public agenda on women's rights issues. Chapter 5 illustrated how activists' websites and SNSs pages inform the public on issues that cannot bypass mainstream press restrictions. Chapter 7 showed that even when an issue can circumvent the press filters, journalists may still lag behind activists' online sites and social media users in reporting issues. Also, by gaining an unprecedented opportunity for self-presentation through their online public platforms, women's rights groups seek to build a portrayal of themselves and their movement as not being mediated by the press and state. As was foreshadowed by recent agenda-setting thinkers (McCombs, 2005), under this

new informational environment, the Iranian public can receive a more diverse agenda on women's issues. Especially with the growth of activists' individual SNSs profiles, people are provided with more heterogeneous accounts of an issue, albeit the effect of this possibility on the Iranian public is yet to be uncovered. A serious question is: Will the diversity of perspectives on individual activists' SNSs profiles lead to fragmentation of public debate, as was warned by Habermas (2006)?

This thesis has also disclosed that activists' online alternative media has both a first- and second-level agenda-building influence on the Iranian print media agenda. Evidence from interviews with journalists and activists shows that the activism's online sites influence the print media at the first-level of agenda-building via two processes: (a) print media journalists making use of activists' online news and case specific reports in order to get ideas for news subjects (see Chapter 7, Section 7.2.1); and (b) women-related reports initially produced by journalists either online or offline being subsequently amplified by activists' online sites and their social media followers, consequently capturing more attention of the press (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.2). It was revealed that in both processes, the online stir created by social media users has the potential to affect press decision about the newsworthiness of a case. When the activists' online issues are promoted by online users, they gain more coverage in journalists' reports. Thus, the research suggests that in this era, social media users can act as catalyst in enhancing the agenda-building influence of activists' alternative media.

This study has provided no evidence to show that print media journalists also reflect attributes in activists' online reports. Indeed, the journalists interviewed in this study used such reports only to the extent of getting ideas for subjects of their reports. It suggests, however, that the relationship between activists' online media and print media journalists generate an effect which can result in second-level agenda-building. The experience of interviewed journalists showed that, although attributes in opinion articles published through activist websites are not directly resonated in their reports, these articles enhance their knowledge of women's rights and help them scrutinize related issues from new angles. Therefore, such online articles inspire a change in their perspective when developing coverage of women-related cases.

8.2 Recommendations for Future Practice

From the start, the researcher's intention was to develop a study that, in addition to contributing to the theoretical field, would be used by the country's activists as an empirical and objective

assessment of the consequences of the Internet for Iranian activism. This study suggests that for women's rights activists, Internet-mediated communication has opened the prospects for independency from the mainstream media and government restrictions in spreading their causes and attaining public support; has improved their media presentation; has stimulated more interactivity and collaborations among and within activist groups; and has enhanced participation of dispersed and low-profile individual activists in decision-making processes and collective action. At the same time, the study alerts the downsides of individual utilization of SNSs by these activists. Due to the rise of activism 2.0 and the growing importance of social networking sites in Iran's socio-political sphere, this section offers two recommendations for the future practice of women's rights activists on these sites: social media education for individual activists, and more collective and strategic usage of social networking sites. These recommendations can be also used by other Iranian activists to prevent the pitfalls of social media use explored in this study.

It should be highlighted that due to the high pace of advancement in technology, a noteworthy change has happened in Iran's online sphere since the research fieldwork: social messaging applications have been gaining popularity amongst the Iranian public and activists. Given the fact that SNSs and social messaging applications are both faces of social media and developed around social networking platforms and user-generated content technology, the following suggestions can be also helpful for the deployment of social messaging applications, although further research is needed to explore the impacts emerging from the particular features of this new social media technology and the ways in which they are utilized by Iranian activists.

The results of this study revealed that women's rights activism has been damaged by a number trends on social networking sites. To wit: an unreliable and shallow presentation of activism issues; emphasis on personal rather than collective understanding of activism objectives and actions; aiming to gain the approval of social media users, causing the propagation of individual activities and achievements rather than collective gains; distraction from on-the-ground activities; and overlooking the demands of women marginalized on social media. These trends indicate that the online behavior of women's rights activists on SNSs is in serious need of revision. The solution would be not to reduce individual online social networking activities, because as this study has revealed, the individual profiles on SNSs have empowered, in particular, younger and lower profile activists and have added to the number of communication

channels with the Iranian public. Activists can use the results of this study to develop their own solution to tackle the problem. Meanwhile, this study suggests that a reasonable approach would be to educate individual activists on the harmful impacts of social media and its effective usage. These activists may not be fully aware of how they can hurt their collective identity when they overstress their personal ideas and achievements on their social media profiles. They do not know how to use these online sites for their individual activities in a way that does not threaten the unity of the activism. The activists would need to be reminded that their online social networking activities can distract them from their collective responsibilities; and turn them from an activist to a slactivist. They would also need training on the principles of content generation on SNS in order to maintain the quality of their public information. In addition, to increase public support for the women's rights movement, they could benefit from analytical articles on the role of social media in today's movements, and how activists in the world are effectively using these online technologies.

Although individual activists are personally urged to raise their media knowledge, it is recommended that activist groups take the main responsibility for giving activists the skills needed in the new media environment. Chapter 6 reported observations of varying types of materials on activist groups' websites to educate activists on various aspects of the activism. In an era in which social media has become a key activist media and a political tool, women's rights activist groups are urged to include social media training as educational subjects on their online sites, otherwise they would leave behind their target elements within the Iranian government, which have initiated a strategic and planned usage of social media to increase their public legitimacy (see Naeli, 2013).

The activist groups are also urged to develop a more collective and strategic use of SNSs. While the evidence of this study suggests that women's rights activist groups act more successfully in the utilization of SNSs than individual activists, the former use these sites as a complementary platform to websites and, in a very similar way, for top down information dissemination to the public. This study showed that activist groups and campaigns have not fully exploited the interactive and network building potential of this online technology. In addition to their dialogic features, these sites also provide cost-effective and high-speed content production platforms; and as push mediums, they can gain the attention of people who are not interested in women's rights discourse. Considering the unique communication features of these sites, their

growing popularity among Iranians, and their increased usage by politicians to affect public opinion, this study recommends the activist groups increase their social media presence. However, this study suggests a definite need for developing capacities and strategy for an effective deployment of social networking sites. When there is no clear and agreed-upon social media strategy, the groups cannot take maximum advantage nor avoid its downsides.

8.3 Limitations of the Study

There are a number of unavoidable limitations to this study. As mentioned previously in Chapter 4, the research was faced with two data access problems that might have affected its investigation. First, it has suffered from a common weakness of online observation: lack of access to private messages. While interviewees' testimonies about the activist websites and SNSs were triangulated through observational analysis, it is due to this problem that the represented findings about activists' internal communication through e-mail groups should only be read as an analysis of interview data. In spite of this problem, due to the representative combination of the interviewed activists, and the fact that there was no considerable contradiction between the interviewees' statements about e-mail communication, these findings are still noteworthy. Second, the study was limited by access to women's rights activists who left the country, particularly after the 2009 protests. Although the chief focus on the interviewees' selection was on activists in the country, the researcher's intention was also to reflect the viewpoints of diaspora activists who are still involved with the women's rights movement in Iran. Unfortunately, all efforts at convincing them for an interview failed. For this reason, what this research presents about the Internet activities of these activists is based on the experience of their fellow activists in the country.

An additional limitation to this study was imposed by virtue of its research design. The qualitative analysis of this study allowed for a rich understanding of the impacts of Internet-mediated communication on women's rights activists. The important question is to what extent the results of this study can be extended to other Iranian activists. Any attempt to generalize the results about the case of women's rights activists to activists of other fields should be verified carefully particularly for two reasons. First, this research proved that a great many of the impacts of the Internet, particularly the downside of SNSs' deployment, has been linked with the behaviors of individual women's rights activists. Social media usage and the habits of other activists may follow different patterns depending on their personal and professional situations.

As Donmoyer (2000) noted, during his call for rethinking the notion of generalizability in social science, “in the fields in which there is a concern with individuals, not just aggregates, all research findings are tentative” (p. 52). Second, this study illustrated that women’s rights activism’s characteristics influence its relationship with the Internet. Activist groups working on other domains may have different experiences with Internet utilization due to their particularities. For example, it was discussed that the benefits of the Internet for women’s rights activism’s internal cooperation is stimulated by the decentralized organizational structure of activist groups and the enthusiasm for co-operation amongst these groups. The application of these benefits to Iranian activists who do not operate within such a co-operative network should be done with caution. This research also uncovered that the role that the Internet has gained as women’s rights activists’ alternative media, also as an internal communication channel, is to a large extent related to its ability to bypass state control and monitoring. The Internet might not play the same role for activists faced with fewer restrictions due to their raising issues not perceived by the state to be potentially destabilizing.

It is important to note that although the particularities of women’s rights activism limit the generalizability of its results, it nonetheless offers projects beyond itself, the factors of which could manipulate the impacts of Internet-mediated communication on activists, such as the aforementioned government control and internal organizational structure. The achieved results about women’s rights activists also alarm activists in other fields about the potential harm of the Internet. They also form questions for investigation in future studies on other activism cases.

8.4 Suggestions for Future Research

At least four potential directions for future investigation about the social and political potential of the Internet in Iran have emerged from this research. First, more research is required on Iranian activism in the Internet age. As mentioned in Chapter One, the current study is among the very few academic empirical works on Iranian activists’ usage of the Internet technologies. It is unable to represent the wider population of Iranian activists due to its single-case study design. Therefore, its results should be supplemented by future research on other areas of Iranian activism. Such research might elaborate upon the findings emerged from this study. For example, findings about the impacts of women’s rights activists’ SNSs profiles can inspire future research on how collective actions and identities among other Iranian activists are affected by social media. Or, while this study illustrates that state control has influenced the utilization and impacts

of the Internet on women's rights activists, further studies could be conducted to determine how the functions and impacts of online communication differ for challengers, such as environmental activists, who are facing less state control. This comparative approach might provide more consistent, even more generalizable, knowledge about Internet-mediated communication among Iranian activists.

Second, further work could attempt to unravel the anatomy of Iranians using the Internet for socio-political expression. The analysis of interview data in this study supplied initial insights into the reproduction of social class inequalities on social media. Both groups of interviewees, activists and journalists, made the assumption that, on SNSs, the voices of the lower class of society are marginalized mainly in favor of the urban middle class. This assumption throws up questions in need for future investigation. How much does the Internet make it possible for a society's lower class and marginalized groups to make their voices heard? To what extent are the demands of the lower class echoed on social media similarly to the demands of the middle and upper class of that society? While much of the speculation on Iranian social media concentrates on restrictions imposed on public online participation by external factors such as state control and Internet access inequalities, research is also required in determining the relationship between the demographic and social factors of online users and the status they could attain in online discussions. It is also recommended that such research engage with theoretical debates on the Internet as a new public sphere. Has the 'virtual space' in Iran, "a forum for political deliberation", elevated into a 'virtual sphere' which "could facilitate discussion that promotes democratic exchange of ideas and opinions" (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 11)? Do social groups of Iranian society experience freedom and equality in expressing their viewpoints on social media?

Third, as little is yet understood empirically about the agenda-building power of online alternative media in Iran, further research in this field would be of great theoretical and practical significance. The findings of Chapter 7 supplied evidence of the resonance of activists' online information in the print media agenda and, inversely, the spillover of women-related reports from print media into activists' online sites. However, it was beyond the scope and time span of this research to study this two-way spillover via content analysis. Therefore, future inter-media research might be carried out based on quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the Iranian activists' online sites and the country's press to examine the online-offline transition of issues

and frames. This would extend and triangulate the interview findings of this study and draw more decisive conclusions.

Finally, future research could move the debate forward by investigating the impacts of online alternative media on the political agenda. Also, public engagement in political issues through social media highlights the need to include the public as a key force in such studies. Of particular interest is finding out if and how the role of Iranian civil society actors in policy making is affected by this new media environment. Do civil society organizations experience any change in their relationship with administrations by deployment of the Internet? And how does the political structure of the country limit or facilitate the influence of the Internet on the political agenda? Therefore, further research could explore the macro-level effects of online alternative media on the political agenda in such an underexplored context.

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Appendix A: Semi-structured Interview Questions

Interview with women's rights activists:

Part One: Related to RQs 1 & 2

1. How have you been using the Internet for your tasks as a social activist?

- Probes included:
 - How have you and the groups you have worked with used the Internet in your communication with the Iranian people?
 - How have you and the groups you have worked with used the Internet in your internal relations?

2. How do you perceive the effects of your online activities in your communication with the public?

- Probes included:
 - How do you assess the advantages?
 - Have you experienced any challenge or an unintended impact?

3. In a broader context, have you witnessed any change in terms of women's rights activism's public communication since the activists have utilized online communication?

4. How do you perceive the effects of your online activities in your relationship with other activists and with the activist groups you work with?

- Probes included:
 - How do you assess the benefits?
 - Have you experienced any challenges or an unintended impact?

5. In a broader context, have you witnessed any change in terms of women's rights' groups' relationship with their members and with other activist groups since they have utilized the Internet?

Part Two: Related to RQ3

6. How do you perceive the effects of activists' online information on the print media agenda?

- Probes included:
 - If you think you have influenced the press through the Internet, can you be more specific?
 - What do you think of the possible reasons, if you think there is no influence?

7. Have you had any relationship with print media journalists during your causes? If yes, has your online presence affected this relationship?

Closing question: Is there anything you regret saying, any answer you would like to revise, or anything you would like to add?

Interview with the print media journalists

1. How do you perceive the influence of women's rights activists' online media on your reports?

2. Do you use activists' online information during your coverage of women's related issues?

- Probes included:
 - How do you use this information and to what extent?
 - If you do not consider this information in your reports, what are the reasons?

2. Can you think of any other ways in which your reports about women's issues are influenced by activists' online sites?

3. Do you consider women's rights activists as your source of information? If yes, have you experienced any change in your relationship with the activists that can be attributed to the Internet?

Closing question: Is there anything you regret saying, any answer you would like to revise, or anything you would like to add?

Appendix B: Zusammenfassung der Forschungsergebnisse/ Summary of the results

Die Dissertation untersucht den Einfluss von internetbasierter Kommunikation (IBK) auf Iranischen Frauenrechtsaktivismus. Damit wird die Rolle des Internets im Kontext eines der wichtigsten und dynamischsten Aktivismusfelder im Iran und der Region analysiert. Die empirische Untersuchung wird von drei Forschungsfragen geleitet, die über eine Auseinandersetzung mit Charakteristika von Frauenrechtsaktivismus und dem empirischen und theoretischen Forschungsstand von IBK für Aktivismus und soziale Bewegungen hergeleitet wurden. Diese lauten: „Wie hat die Internetnutzung die öffentliche Kommunikation von FrauenrechtsaktivistInnen verändert?“, „Welchen Einfluss hat Internetnutzung auf die internen Beziehungen von FrauenrechtsaktivistInnen?“ und „Wie haben die Online Medien der AktivistInnen die Rezeption von Frauenrechtsfragen in der Iranischen Presse beeinflusst?“

Methodologisch wurde zur Beantwortung der ersten beiden Fragen ein Methodenmix aus qualitativen Interviews mit FrauenrechtsaktivistInnen und Beobachtung von Onlineaktivitäten von Frauenrechtsgruppen und -kampagnen durchgeführt. Daten zur Beantwortung der dritten Forschungsfrage wurden über qualitative Interviews mit FrauenrechtsaktivistInnen und Print-JournalistInnen gesammelt. Die Datenauswertung eröffnet neue und bedeutende Perspektiven auf die Nutzung und den Einfluss dreier Internet-Technologien, die zum Zeitpunkt der Datenerhebung von FrauenrechtsaktivistInnen größtenteils genutzt wurden: E-Mail-Listen, Webseiten und Soziale Netzwerke.

Die Ergebnisse mit Blick auf die erste Forschungsfrage zur Nutzung von IBK zur Kommunikation „nach außen“, konzentrieren sich auf Webseiten und Soziale Netzwerke. Diese zeigen, dass Frauenrechtsgruppen und individuelle AkteurInnen von der Nutzung von Webseiten und Sozialen Netzwerken hauptsächlich dadurch profitieren, dass Restriktionen von klassischen Printmedien umgangen und die Kontrolle über öffentlich zugängliche Informationen von Seiten der AktivistInnen beibehalten werden kann. Soziale Netzwerke dezentralisieren zudem die öffentliche Kommunikation der Aktivistinnen, indem auch *low-profile* AktivistInnen sichtbar werden, die im Gegensatz zu *high-profile* AktivistInnen auf den Webseiten und den Printmedien häufig unterrepräsentiert sind. Zudem stellen soziale Netzwerke und zu einem kleineren Teil auch Webseiten, Kommunikationskanäle zwischen AktivistInnen und deren *Audiences* in beide

Richtungen bereit. Die Studie zeigt allerdings auch, dass Soziale Netzwerke neben ihrer emanzipatorischen Rolle, der öffentlichen Kommunikation der AktivistInnen in zwei Formen schaden: Erstens leidet die Qualität des Aktivismus-Diskurses auf Grund der informellen Kommunikationsformen und einem stärkeren Fokus auf die individuellen Profile der AktivistInnen. Zweitens, auf Grund starker Disparitäten in Internetzugang und -nutzung im Land ist die *Audience* der Online-Medien der AktivistInnen stark beschränkt und repräsentiert nicht die Iranische Gesellschaft.

In Bezug auf die zweite Fragestellung zeigen die Studienergebnisse erstens, dass Email-Listen als wichtigste Internettechnologie zur Kommunikation untereinander und zwischen Gruppen von AktivistInnen genutzt werden. Im Gegensatz zu Treffen offline erleichtern sie kollektive Entscheidungsfindungsprozesse, indem auch geographisch weit auseinanderliegenden AktivistInnen einbezogen werden können, gleichzeitig sind sie kostengünstiger und tragen weniger Sicherheitsrisiken. Zudem weist die Studie nach, dass die konventionelleren Formen von IBK, namentlich Webseiten und Email-Gruppen, die kollektive Identität der AktivistInnen stärken und Kollaborationen im weiteren Netzwerk anregen. Drittens, das Angebot von Aktivismus-Webseiten mobilisiert den Austausch relevanten Wissens unter verschiedenen Frauenrechtsgruppen. Gleichzeitig allerdings kann, viertens, die Nutzung Sozialer Netzwerke einzelner AktivistInnen Spannungen innerhalb der Frauenrechtsnetzwerke hervorrufen und die kollektive Identität der AktivistInnen gefährden. Die individualisierte (Selbts-)Darstellung von AktivistInnen auf Sozialen Netzwerken fördern *Slactivism*, indem narzisstische Repräsentationen begünstigt und AktivistInnen von ihrer Partizipation im Kollektiv „auf der Straße“ abgelenkt werden.

Bezüglich der dritten Forschungsfrage zeigt die Analyse, dass Möglichkeiten des Agenda-Settings über die Nutzung von Online-Kommunikation von FrauenrechtsaktivistInnen durch zwei voneinander abhängigen Faktoren beeinflusst wird. Der erste Faktor ist die Offenheit der Printmedien, Frauenrechte auf ihre Agenda zu setzen. Diese Bereitschaft ist nicht nur auf redaktionelle Leitlinien, sondern zu einem bedeutenderen Anteil auch auf staatliche Restriktionen zurückzuführen. Der zweite Faktor betrifft Aktivismusformen und -dynamiken. Wenn der Frauenrechtsaktivismus offline eher inaktiv ist, hat dies auch Konsequenzen für die Präsenz in den klassischen Medien, auch wenn zu dem Zeitpunkt signifikante Online-aktivitäten verfolgt werden.

Neben Einflussmöglichkeiten auf die Frauenrechts-Agenda, welche von diesen beiden Faktoren abhängen, identifiziert die Studie drei Mechanismen, welche effektiv Resonanz zu Frauenrechtsthemen in Printmedien erzeugen: Erstens, JournalistInnen nutzen Online-News und Fall-Reporte der AktivistInnen zur Berichterstattung und Erarbeitung eigener Ideen. Zweitens werden Artikel von JournalistInnen, welche Frauenrechte thematisieren, von Online-Präsenzen der AktivistInnen geteilt und zusätzlich von deren Followern auf Sozialen Netzwerken vervielfältigt. Damit wird mehr Aufmerksamkeit für die klassischen Medien erzeugt. Drittens beeinflussen die von AktivistInnen online veröffentlichten Artikel das Wissen und die Haltung von JournalistInnen gegenüber den AktivistInnen und den von ihnen aufgegriffenen Problemstellungen.

Die gesammelten empirischen Ergebnisse dieser Studie leisten einen innovativen Beitrag zur Forschung zu Internet und Aktivismus im Kontext von sich stetig öffnenden und schließenden Freiräumen für die Zivilgesellschaft.

Summary of the results

The objective of this thesis is to explore the impacts of Internet-mediated communication on Iranian women's rights activism. This activism provides a window to understanding the role of the Internet in the context of one of the most prominent and dynamic activist circles in Iran and the region. The empirical investigation was directed by three research questions derived from a review of the characteristics of women's rights activism and the extant theoretical and empirical studies about online communication for activism and social movements. To wit: "How has Internet utilization affected women's rights activists' public communication?", "How has Internet utilization affected the activists' internal relations?", and "How has the activists' online media affected the resonance of women's rights issues in the Iranian press?" The methodological approach taken to answer the first two research questions was a mixed methodology based on qualitative interviews with women's rights activists and observation of the online activities of women's rights groups and campaigns. The data for the third research question was collected through qualitative interviews with women's rights activists and the country's print media journalists.

The interview and observational analyses in this investigation has generated a fresh, in-depth insight into the patterns of use and the impact of three Internet technologies that, at the time of data collection, were being utilized by women's rights activists to the greatest extent: e-mail groups, websites, and social networking sites (SNSs). The findings with respect to the first research question concentrate on the websites and SNSs as the main Internet technologies employed for the activism's public communication. The results show that women's rights activist groups and individuals benefit from the deployment of websites and SNSs, firstly and chiefly, by the ability to bypass print media restrictions and increase their control over the flow of their public information. Also SNSs decentralize the activists' public communication, giving more of a voice to low-profile activists suffering from the hegemony of high-profile activists in websites and print media. In addition, SNSs and, to the lower degree, websites create a two-way communication between the activists and their audiences. This investigation shows that besides its empowering role, however, activists' online media can also inflict harm to activists-public communication in two ways. First, the quality of the activism's discourses is undermined on SNSs due to the informal nature of communication on these sites and the increase of activists' individual profiles. Second, due to the problem of Internet access and usage inequalities in the country, activists' online media limits their access to audiences who do not truly represent the totality of Iranian society.

Findings in relation to the second research question uncover that e-mail groups, as the main Internet technology employed for the activist groups' intra- and intercommunication, facilitates collective decision-making by giving a voice to geographically dispersed activists and eliminating the financial and security costs of offline meetings. The study finds, too, that more conventional forms of Internet-mediated communication, e-mail groups and websites, strengthen the activists' collective identity and stimulate collaboration within the network of the activism. Also, the array of activist websites mobilizes and shares the activism-related knowledge across women's rights groups. At the same time, however, deployment of SNSs by individual activists raises tensions within the women's right activism network and threatens activists' collective identity. The thesis discusses that women's rights activists' individual representations on SNSs give rise to 'slacktivism' by fostering narcissism and distracting activists from participation in collective on-the-ground activities.

The analysis with regards to the third research question reveals that the agenda-building influence of women's rights activists' online media on the traditional Iranian press is manipulated by two interrelated factors. The first factor is press openness to include women's rights' issue in its agenda, which is not only defined by editorial policies but, to a more significant degree, determined by state-imposed restrictions on the Iranian press. The second factor is the dynamism of the activism. When women's rights activists enter an inactivity mode in the offline realm, they are given less presence in the media agenda, despite having significant online activity. Aside from the magnitude of the agenda-building influence manipulated by these factors, this thesis uncovers that the activists' online media has become effective in resonating women's rights discourses into the press agenda through three major mechanisms: print media journalists making use of activists' online news and case specific reports in order to get ideas for news subjects; women-related reports that are initially produced by journalists either online or offline are amplified by activists' online sites and their social media followers, consequently capturing more attention of the press; and activists' online articles affecting journalists' knowledge and attitude toward the activism and their issues.

The first hand empirical results of this study make a contribution to the academic knowledge of the Internet for activists operating under constant closings and openings imposed on civil society.

Appendix C: Prior Publication that has resulted from this dissertation

Naeli, M. (2018). Internet-mediated communication in activists' internal networks: The case of Iranian women's rights activism. In C. Richter, A. Antonakis, & C. Harders (Eds.), *Digital media and the politics of transformation in the Arab world and Asia* (pp. 113-135). Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Appendix D: About the Author

For reasons of data protection, the curriculum vitae is not published in the electronic version.