

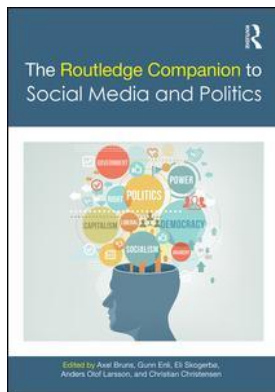
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### The Importance of 'Social' in Social Media

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## THE IMPORTANCE OF 'SOCIAL' IN SOCIAL MEDIA

### Lessons from Iran

*Gholam Khiabany*

#### Introduction

Since the financial crisis in 2008, the popular uprisings in Iran in 2009, the revolutions in several Arab countries at the beginning of 2011, and the occupy movements in the U.S. and elsewhere in the global north have indicated a growing resistance to dictatorships and decades of neo-liberal globalisation. From the streets of Tehran to Tahir Square, Syntagma Square, Puerta del Sol, and Zuccotti Park, we have witnessed a new wave of resistance to a system that has failed to generate wealth and freedom for all. The past decade has also provided some of the most evocative moments when power met its opposite; in some cases, in decisive and surprising ways. Technology, again and again, has emerged as one of the main explanations for this new wave of revolts.

The very use of a wide range of media and communicative platforms, the innovative use of image, sound, and music to inform, organise and mobilise dissent and demonstrations, and in particular the circulation of information via Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms has prompted many commentators to suggest that it is impossible to comprehend the political nature of the existing protests in Iran, the Arab World, and elsewhere, without recognising the centrality of the new technologies (Giroux, 2009). Manuel Castells has also argued that the Internet has contributed to the eruptions of such popular power because, he argues, "the more interactive and self-configurable communication is, the less hierarchical is the organisation and the more participatory is the movement. . . . This is why the networked social movements of the digital age represent a new species of social movement" (Castells, 2012: 15). But others have criticised celebratory accounts of the role of new media for neglecting or putting less emphasis on the importance of organisation. For example, Gladwell (2010) has stressed that such claims fail to consider the strong organisational ties that are crucial for any social movement. The debate, somehow, has been reduced to a false binary of 'believers' and 'non-believers'. The continuing use of the Internet to mount challenges against injustice, repression, and discrimination on the one hand, and the effective use of social media by the terrifying Islamic State (ISIS) on the other, has shown that there is nothing inevitable about the use of these tools and that they are the direct outcome of broader social and economic policy and as such are subject to alteration and direction.

In addition, treating social movements' effective use of, and reliance upon, communication technologies as a sociological novelty ignores significant historical precedents of importance and relevance of communications of various kinds to protests, revolts, and revolutions. What is novel, perhaps, is identifying the new waves of struggle not with the cause but with the tools of these movements. There are nevertheless two important points that should be highlighted. If the impact of social media in this conjuncture has been rather overstated and exaggerated, there is very little doubt that the media (social and otherwise) has been crucial in recording the events and the courage of thousands and millions of citizens who have managed to reclaim real public spaces and make them their own. One Egyptian demonstrator reminded us of this reality in a simple and yet powerful way: "Before, I was watching television; now it is television that's watching me" (cited in Badiou, 2012:110). Second, and without a doubt, social movements and significant events not only use media but also make them and put them on the map. In the same way that war and turmoil made the likes of CNN and Aljazeera into internationally recognised 'brands', social movements have given the likes of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube a much-needed political and social legitimacy. The 'Facebook generation' is no longer a negative or pejorative term used to lament the younger generation's detachment from and indifference towards politics. Political activism in Iran certainly has contributed a great deal in converting technologies that were initially considered banal and irrelevant to politics into respectable and highly prized platforms. As Andy Greenberg (2009) suggested in *Forbes*: Iranian protests are good for Twitter's business.

However, even if we limit our focus to the significant and visible boiling points of social movements and ignore daily, protracted, and not highly visible digital activities, we are confronted with the how and why of the outcomes of such social awakening. The failure of the Iranian uprising, the breathlessness of the Arab revolutions, and the collapse of the Occupy movements demonstrate that while such movements have shaken, at least in some instances, the foundations of the system, they have failed to form a coherent and sustainable opposition. If it is really true that we cannot begin to comprehend the revolts and political activism in Iran and elsewhere without understanding the new realities of screen culture, then what does the failure of such movements reveal about the myths of new media? This chapter examines aspects of digital activism with particular reference to and examples from Iran, where cyberspace came to be seen as a unified, unproblematic and un-segmented site of resistance (Sreberny and Khiabany, 2010). By looking at a specific example of a hugely successful Facebook campaign (*My Stealthy Freedom*; [www.facebook.com/StealthyFreedom](http://www.facebook.com/StealthyFreedom)), this chapter highlights the importance of concrete analysis of concrete situations and pays particular attention to what can/cannot be achieved through digital activism and participation.

### Unveiling Threats in Iran

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 remains problematic, both theoretically and politically, and the 'trans-class' and 'religious' nature of the revolution has been the main source of confusion over the precise nature of the state which replaced the monarchy. Gilbert Achcar (2004: 57) has described the Iranian revolution as a 'permanent revolution in reverse', something that started with such emancipatory potential and something that could have grown over into a socialist transformation but instead produced a strange polity and state. The revolution, without a doubt, had an emancipatory character, but

elements of counter-revolution were clearly visible from early on. The tension between the revolution and the counter-revolution, and the existence of multiple sovereignty, aspiration and power contentions, urges an analytical distinction between the Iranian revolution and the Islamic Republic (Moghadam, 1989:75).

The contestation of the result of the June 2009 presidential election in Iran was a significant indication of the continuing tensions and contradictions within Iran, and above all, of the failure of the Islamic state to impose its monopoly over the legitimate use of symbolic violence and its continuing struggle to manufacture consent to its rule. That electoral coup triggered unprecedented and impassioned involvement inside Iran and brought many simmering dissatisfactions—about the lack of rights and freedoms, inflation and growing inequality—to the surface. In 2009, as has been the case in the past 36 years, the condition of women in Iran was one of the major source of dissatisfaction.

The Islamic Republic of Iran does not recognise the equality of both sexes; indeed, it denies women equal rights. The constitution of the Islamic Republic itself was (and is) part of a wholehearted attack on women's rights and an important aspect of overall policy of exclusion of women from public life. In the first few years of the Islamic Republic, many of the rights that women had gained under the Pahlavi dictatorship were taken back. The segregation of the sexes in public spaces; overt gender discrimination; compulsory hijab (which was one of the first official policy of the new state); the exclusion of women from a number of professions; reinforcing patriarchal policies in terms of divorce, guardianship of children, and lowering the age of marriage for girls were among measures used to 'purify' women and society and bringing back the 'glorious' tradition of what was perceived to be the true Islam (Tohidi, 2002). The 'women's question' remains the most significant and visible sign of the Iranian state's contempt for political and cultural rights and democracy. And it is also no accident that the most popular digital campaign in recent years has focused on this very issue. This campaign, which has received wide international and national coverage, is My Stealthy Freedom ([www.facebook.com/StealthyFreedom](http://www.facebook.com/StealthyFreedom)).

On 5 May 2014, Iranian journalist and activist Massih Alinejad set up a Facebook page named Stealthy Freedom (Azadiye Yawaschaki). This page is dedicated to posting images of women with hijab removed. In a few days, the page had received over 100,000 likes, and at the time of writing (less than a year after the launch of the campaign), the page had over 760,000 followers: a much bigger following than the winner of 2009 presidential election, Mir-Hossein Musavi's, Facebook page at the peak of 2009 Iranian uprising (Christensen, 2009). So far, hundreds of women have submitted their pictures without hijab. Pictures are taken in various locations in Iran: parks, beaches, markets, streets, and elsewhere. Alinejad states that the campaign began rather simply:

Once I posted pictures of [myself] in London, free, without a scarf. I received messages from Iranian women saying: "Don't publish these pictures because we envy you." Soon after I published another picture of myself driving in my hometown in Iran, again without a scarf. And I said to Iranian women: "I bet you can do the same." Many of them started to send me their photos without hijab, so I created a page called "My Stealthy Freedom." . . . If I were in Iran this website wouldn't exist. From far away those voiceless women can express themselves for the first time [in] more than 30 years. (Kowalska, 2014: paras. 17–19)

A post on the Stealthy Freedom Facebook page states:

This page does not belong to any political group and the initiative reflects the concerns of Iranian women, who face legal and social restrictions. All of the photos and captions posted have been sent by women from all over Iran and this is a site dedicated to Iranian women inside the country who want to share their “stealthily” taken photos without the veil.

Indeed, Alinejad, in an interview with BBC, insisted that women who have sent their pictures “are not women activists, but just ordinary women talking from their hearts” (BBC, 2014: para. 5).

Many of the amazing pictures are accompanied by captions: some short, some longer, some in a poetic language, and others are mischievous or defiant. One caption reads: “I just want to have the right to CHOOSE! Maybe I would have even chosen to wear a scarf if I’d had options to choose from. But it hurts me so much when others make decisions for ME instead of myself.”

### Another says:

“I’m free

I’m a woman from a country with the least respect for human rights.

I was born in a country where religion, tradition, and Islamic Regime has destroyed the beauty.

I can see the freedom I will have gained soon.

And I’ll enjoy the feeling of belonging to myself.

I’ll enjoy my rights as a citizen.

I’ll enjoy human rights.

I’ll enjoy having freedom of choice.”

In some pictures women are holding their scarves behind them, while the wind blows them like a flag. One of these scarves is green, and the caption reminds everyone, with a reference to the colour of Musavi’s campaign, that “once the colour of green was forbidden.” In one picture we see three women, of three generations, side by side, in the street. The caption is simple and powerful: “Three generations in one frame. And we beget freedom for ourselves at a corner of the street. Grandmother, mother, and daughter. Hoping for the day this new generation can achieve their simplest right before their hair turns grey.” Another picture is accompanied by a caption which, in a simple and yet powerful way, expresses the sense of freedom, the beauty and pleasure, of wind blowing through the hair: “This is Iran. . . . The feeling of the wind blowing through every strand of hair is a girl’s biggest dream.”

Others go beyond articulating the very basic (and denied) feeling and pleasure of sensing the wind. Many insist on the fundamental rights of citizens, of the right to choose, on the importance of solidarity, and express the hope:

We are saying “no” to the compulsory hijab with all our force and conviction. As someone belonging to the new generation of this country with my mother firmly defending one of the most basic human rights. We have the best judgement ourselves and we do not need anyone to guide us on our behalf. I hope

that one day we will achieve freedom and equality for every single citizen of our beloved Iran that we will proudly call our homeland.

Not all submitted pictures are images of *veil-less* women. The campaign has also moved beyond a simple show of defiance to bold statements highlighting the brutal force of the state's 'morality'. In one post there is a sequence of images, showing a couple being harassed by the police in a park. The caption reads:

"Islamic Republic" of Iran; where a compassionate touch is a sin and the act of sympathizing is a crime. I would like my motherland back. In fact, we will take it back, it may not be tomorrow or next year, but it will happen.

The campaign increasingly—and perhaps inevitably—includes videos, critical assessments of events in Iran, as well as the international coverage of the campaign and expression of international solidarity. Solo singing by women has been officially banned since 1979, and after yet another pronouncement by state officials that women's solo singing must be forbidden, Masih Alinejad launched #myforbiddensong as the new campaign for #mystealthyfreedom. The controversy began after the release of an album entitled *Love You, Oh Ancient Land*. The album, which was released on 27 January 2015, is a compilation of traditional Iranian music that includes a vocal solo by a woman artist. Some conservative officials used this as an opportunity to warn against 'moral decay' and 'corruption' in Iran. On 9 February 2015, Masih Alinejad posted a video of herself singing on the platform of the Temple underground station in London. This is how she explains her reasoning:

After starting a Facebook page where women could post pictures of themselves without their hijab, the state launched a violent smear campaign against me: I was raped by three men in London. Under the influence of mind-altering drugs, I had removed items of clothing, and the men raped me in front of my son. That is what the Iran state TV reported in a short news segment about me. For the record, I was never assaulted or raped or took any mind-altering drugs. But my real revenge is to use what the hardliners are most petrified of: a video of myself singing in a London subway station, without a veil.

Alinejad also launched #myforbiddensong as part of My Stealthy Freedom campaign, and encouraged others to do the same and send the videos to the Facebook page. One of the significant outcomes of the myth of the role of social media in the Iranian uprising was to confuse, or perhaps even substitute, media for the movement. 'You are the media' was one of the claims of the so-called Green Movement. Yet at the same time that activists were being confined to the realm of small media, many well-known figures appeared on mainstream media as the voice of the movement. The same people who appeared in the mainstream media also controlled the organised networks, including the Facebook pages of the 'Green movement'. In a post in March 2015, Alinejad revived the slogan of 'You are all media.' In her post she said:

Suggestion: Every woman a media. A veiled woman appears on Iranian state television to say compulsory hijab is the demand of all women. You, every single one of you, can be a media, and if you agree, take a film of yourself as

Iranian women, wherever in the world you are, and say in one minute, why you are against compulsory hijab, or describe what problems compulsory hijab has created for you.

### The Not So Stealthy Reactions to the Campaign

The popularity of this online campaign is unprecedented in Iran. No other digital campaign has generated such a level of participation and interest in terms of 'likes', comments, shared pictures, and international coverage. Yet the very success of this campaign itself raises a very interesting question: Why have pictures of women with dishevelled hair, many in romantic poses, many smiling, looking dreamy, or defiant, received such a level of support and coverage? After all, these are the types of pictures that are very common for Facebook profiles. My argument is that this campaign and the fantastic and wide range of images, text, and music that have appeared on this Facebook page are not just about social media. The answer to the aforementioned question, as well as the reason for the campaign itself, can be found not in the Facebook page but in the very specific social context in Iran. The condition of each social group in this wider context goes a long way in explaining the reaction and the interest they generate. How strongly different groups feel, and more importantly, how strongly and vigorously they could, want, and be willing to fight is also more than about social media. The women's question, as I have already indicated, has been and remains a political volcano under the feet of the Islamic Republic. Let us start with the reaction of the state.

Despite the massive support for the 'Stealthy Freedom' campaign, it has also generated different forms of backlash and criticism. Two weeks after the launch of the original campaign, a Facebook page entitled 'Men's Stealthy Freedom' ([www.facebook.com/menstealthysfreedom](http://www.facebook.com/menstealthysfreedom)) appeared and began to publish pictures of men covering their head or body with sheets and scarves. This attempt to ridicule the original campaign, with 100,000 likes, has turned into a familiarly laddish and sexist page containing not only men with scarves and/or make-up but with the type of juvenile jokes, cartoons, videos, and semi-nude pictures that grace similar online/offline publications across the world.

The backlash, however, has also taken a more familiar and aggressive form. One of the most powerful weapons utilised by certain sections of the Iranian state, used to suppress dissent in the online environment, is the colonisation of the Internet. The Iranian state has long recognised the usefulness of the Internet as a tool for propaganda and furthering its policies and aims. In that respect, it has embraced technologies and launched many initiatives and religious/conservative websites (Sreberny and Khiabany, 2010). As such, it came as no surprise that a number of rival Facebook groups were set up to ridicule and challenge the Stealthy Freedom campaign. Among such rivals is the Real Freedom of Iranian Women page ([www.facebook.com/RealFreedomOfIranianWomen](http://www.facebook.com/RealFreedomOfIranianWomen)). This page was launched on 12 May 2014, exactly a week after the launch of the Stealthy Freedom campaign. The offensive began with a message celebrating the veil: 'Beautiful Hijab; My Right, My Choice, My Life'. The second message, posted on the same day, explains the reason for the launch of this Facebook page:

In recent days it has been observed that the actors of foreign media led by a spy, Masih Alinejad, have called for de-veiling in public places in Iran and

have asked Iranian women to send pictures of de-veiling in public places such as metro, streets, etc. to the Facebook page entitled 'Women Stealthy Freedom in Iran' which Masih Alinejad is managing.

The post claims that Alinejad campaign is set up with the help of "her organisation" [British intelligence organisation MI6], and has received a wide coverage in international media. In response, the rival campaign asked their supporters to help them challenge the Stealthy Freedom campaign by sending pictures, graphics, poems, translations, memories, as well as helping with administrating the page. Insisting that Stealthy Freedom is part of 'soft war' against the Islamic state, this page has published a wide range of images, videos, and texts promoting and propagating support for compulsory hijab. If an important and recognisable aspect of Stealthy Freedom has revolved around generating international coverage and solidarity, the so-called Real Freedom of Iranian Women campaign has also tried to demonstrate its own 'international' appeal by publishing pictures of veiled women elsewhere, including in the West. The purpose of the page, however, is not just to remind women that hijab is compulsory and an Iranian women's 'choice' but to also generate fear. One early post, on 18<sup>th</sup> May 2014, warns:

be careful of your photos in Facebook and Instagram  
stealing women's photos under the name of "stealthy freedoms"  
stealing women's private pictures by Masih Alinejad  
in this short video one of the viewers of Voice of America program says that  
her private pictures were stolen by Masih Alinejad and were put in the stealthy  
freedoms page without her knowing about it!  
Mrs. Masih Alinejad! this is the violation of privacy  
you claim that you are a good person, so why do you steal??  
any way no one is not expecting more from betrayers and servants of intel-  
ligence service.

Warnings about privacy from a state which brutally intervenes in the most private of affairs is, of course, more than ironic. However, many posts go beyond that and openly threaten women who choose to be seen in public without hijab. Some have tried to identify women who have appeared without hijab on the Stealthy Freedom page. Additional Facebook pages have been launched for that very purpose (against privacy). The Real Freedom of Iranian Women page, however, has less than 10,000 likes, and another rival page, For the Attention of Supporters of Stealthy Freedom, has only received 280 likes.

The backlash is even more aggressive and threatening offline. Just two days after the launch of Stealthy Freedom, hundreds demonstrated in Tehran demanding the immediate arrest of women who ignore and defy the compulsory hijab. At the same time, conservative officials and media have tried their best to attack the Stealthy Freedom campaign and smear it. In the summer of 2014, Iranian state television ran a false story reporting that Masih Alinejad was in a drug-induced, hallucinatory state when she removed her clothing and was raped by three men in front of her son. Also, in June 2014, just over two-thirds of the Islamic Republic's parliamentarians signed a letter urging the President to take measures to enforce and safeguard compulsory hijab. In their letter, 195 out of 295 MPs blamed the foreign media, and in particular satellite television channels, for the defiant attitudes of Iranian women. The MPs suggested



that, “one of the main areas of cultural invasion is in trying to change the way of life of Iranians regarding the veil. We ask that you give the necessary orders to enforce the law” (Arab News, 2014: para. 5). Such threats are real. Over the past 36 years, regardless of what has been suspended, the violent enforcement of the particular brand of Iranian state ‘moral’ policy has remained intact. The constant threats and attacks against Iranian women over the past 30 years, the arrest of a group of Iranian fans who created a tribute to Pharrell Williams’s hit song *Happy*, not to mention the horrifying incidents in which many women had acid thrown at their faces, are all clear examples of the denial of the very basic right to life and freedom. The varied reactions to the Stealthy Freedom campaign, the launch of rival pages, and the Iranian state’s response to it, also clearly demonstrated that the debate over compulsory hijab is hotly contested and unsettled.

### Contradictions and Limits of Digital Activism

The Stealthy Freedom campaign has to be seen as a continuation of the challenges, concerns, and anxieties over hijab in Iran. This concern has been expressed, produced, and reproduced in different forms. Without a doubt, the Stealthy Freedom campaign has to be seen as an innovative and effective idea for highlighting the real concerns over compulsory hijab in particular, and women’s personal freedom in general. The campaign also reveals the great potential of civil disobedience against ‘moral’ concerns of the Iranian state. Yet, the campaign is not free from contradictions and limits. Let us briefly examine some of the limitations of these forms of digital activism.

The first point worth highlighting is the mismatch between local context and concerns (internal) and the framing and reception of these concerns outside the geographical boundaries of the local (external). In contrast to the virtual and real attacks and threats against the Stealthy Freedom campaign by Iranian state officials, media, and supporters, the overwhelming feeling *outside* Iran has been one of support, solidarity, and encouragement. Yet, the positive international coverage and support should not obscure a number of contradictions and dilemmas. There is always a danger, as Zishad Lak (2014) reminds us, that a local struggle might be assimilated into something completely different. For her, the Stealthy Freedom campaign is one of those instances in which “local resistance risks being thrust into obscurity to be protected from colonial interpretations. What we should be wary of is the audience or the interlocutor that is implicit in the message around which the actor organises her actions” (Lak, 2014: para. 7). In every story published in mainstream British or American media, one comes across supporting statements encouraging Iranian women with phrases such as ‘Go Girls!’, or simply describing participants in this campaign as ‘Beautiful, smart, confident, and happy’ and welcoming them ‘to the 21st century’.

The problem with such expressions of solidarity is not that the information provided about the lack of freedom in Iran is inaccurate but rather, as Haleh Anvari suggested in the *New York Times*, the Western fetish of and obsession with gazing at Iranian women has turned them into “Iran’s Eiffel Tower or Big Ben” (Anvari, 2014: para. 4). Such constructions of Muslim women as ‘cultural icons’, as Leila Abu-Lughod (2013) has demonstrated, not only has been used to simplify the complex realities of the Middle Eastern societies but also have been used as an excuse for military interventions that are partly justified to ‘save’ Muslim women. Since the 9/11 terrorist attack, these ‘cultural icons’ have come to represent the dividing line between ‘us’ and ‘them’, modern and traditional, civilised and barbaric.

There are two additional points that need to be highlighted. First of all, as the international success of the Stealthy Freedom campaign shows us, new technologies do, indeed, break geographical boundaries and precipitate international sympathy and solidarity. However, these technologies are also born in specific historical societies and social relations. Time and space compression (Harvey, 1990) does not make space irrelevant, and new technologies by themselves cannot bypass assumptions, prejudices, and stereotypes. The Stealthy Freedom Facebook campaign is not immune from such prejudices and stereotypes but also (whether by accident or design) reinforces them.

Furthermore, and again, as Abu-Lughod (2013) passionately reminds us, the problem of gender inequality is not simply a religious matter alone. Neither animosity towards social rights and freedom and popular rule nor the hostility to the idea of gender equality is particular or peculiar to Islam. The idea of gender equality is not a God-given truth divorced from space and time. Let us remember the controversy over *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, or the violent attack against Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Let us also not forget that the level of opposition of Vatican to abortion or women's right to divorce was (and is) such that Pope John Paul II asked victims of rape in Bosnia-Herzegovina not to have abortions. Let us also not forget the controversy over women priests in the Church of England. Indeed, if women bishops are any index of 'development', then the Church of England has only recently stepped 'into the 21st century'!

Second, it is important to note that, as far as Iran is concerned, and in the context of the war on terror,

the knowledge production about Iran has become a lucrative business for those who provide expertise in different capacities, from testimonials in media, books and human rights reports, to research and collection of information in think tanks, state and private intelligence firms and universities. (Shakhsari, 2011: 7).

The hyper-visibility of some Iranian digital activism in the west cannot be understood outside of this context. Shakhsari describes an Iranian blogger outside of Iran as a figure "that acts as an entrepreneur, who is responsible for his/her own economic well-being and markets him/herself as the source of valuable information" (Shakhsari, 2011: 11).

This is not to ignore the impact of the Stealthy Freedom campaign nor to underplay or underestimate the very aggressive state policy towards Iranian women. Gender discrimination, or to put it more accurately, sexual apartheid, is one of the most visible and key defining features of the Islamic Republic of Iran. And yet, violent measures taken by the Iranian state, from the very beginning, have provoked the persistent opposition of Iranian women who have refused to conform to the moral conceptions of conservative Islamists in the country. For 36 years, Iranian women have used every opportunity to challenge those very 'moral' conceptions, including compulsory hijab. Therefore, Masih Alinejad was wrong to suggest that the Stealthy Freedom website could not exist if she were in Iran, or to suggest that Iranian women can only express themselves 'from far away', or that this is the first time in 30 years that Iranian women have done so. It is not for the first time, since the coming to power of the Islamic Republic, Iranian women have defied the state and have expressed themselves.

Second, the Stealthy Freedom campaign has reinforced the myth of the role of social media in the Iranian context and confuses, or perhaps even substitutes, media for the

movement. ‘You are the media’ was one of the claims of the so-called Green Movement. Masih Alinejad is still promoting the same idea. Yet, it is worth remembering that at the time that activists were being confined to the realm of small media, many of the well-known figures of the Green Movement appeared on mainstream media as the voice of the movement. What was brushed aside was the historical fact that how individuals are organised as intellectuals is by definition a social process. Who gets noticed, who gets to speak, and who is allowed to ‘represent’ the public is never given. In addition, it is rather interesting that in the the current campaign, which has been hailed as a step towards ‘reclaiming individuality’ (Azizee, 2014), the only recognised individual is Masih Alinejad herself. Similar concerns have been raised by Gilda Seddighi who, in her study of Iranian Mothers of Park Laleh and the organisation of priviledges in online space, demonstartes how the network of Iranian mothers who were inspired by the Madres de Plaza de Mayo were excluded from the online activism launched in their names (Seddighi, 2014).

The third issue to consider is the Stealthy Freedom campaign’s narrow focus on hijab. As Azadeh Davachi (2014) has suggested, the campaign effectively reduces the concerns over gender equality in Iran to compulsory hijab when, in fact, for many Iranian women the issue is simply not about hijab but rather a whole set of policies of control, monitoring, and traditions (including hijab) which act as weapons in denying—and violently suppressing—women’s rights. In short, the campaign, by highlighting hijab, neglects or brushes aside different variables and aspects of women’s lack of freedom in Iran. The campaign’s focus on publishing pictures of veil-less Iranian women divides them into two distinct groups defined only in terms of their attitudes towards hijab. This false binary might appeal to the international media, as we have seen, but it fails to provide any concrete and comprehensive model of achieving women’s liberation in Iran.

And finally, it is worth remembering that many such campaigns that highlight a single issue, or a range of issues, have come and gone without leaving much trace or establishing a sustained, influential, long-term campaign. No social change is possible without a sustained and well-established organisation. The ‘networks’ of this kind cannot possibly mount a significant challenge to repression and injustice if they are not transformed into a real network of activists. And, we have been here before. The experience of Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt in the aftermath of the uprisings in these countries clearly indicates what can happen in the absence of real networks and political organisations. Public spaces, such as Tahrir Square (as was the case in Wall Street in New York, Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Syntagma Square in Athens, and St. Paul’s Cathedral in London) were significant instruments of resistance when other means of struggle had been denied to the public. As Harvey has suggested, “what Tahrir Square showed to the world was an obvious truth: that it is bodies on the street and in the squares, not the babble of sentiment on Twitter or Facebook, that really matter” (Harvey, 2012: 162).

### Conclusion

As I have stated, the Stealthy Freedom campaign has been a very innovative initiative. It has provided many Iranian women with a safe place to protest and has highlighted the significant concerns over compulsory hijab in Iran. A significant and valid point made again and again in celebratory accounts of new media is the ‘low barrier to entry’ to the digital media field. But, and as we have seen in the case of Iranian uprising of

2009 and the revolts in the Arab World in 2011, this reality does not make the huge obstacles and contradictions in a major challenge against repressive states redundant. What the experiences of Iran, and in particular Syria and Libya, have shown us is that the state can increase the cost of political participation to a terrifying and deadly level. The cost of digital and real participations (at least in dictatorships) is not the same. Therefore, the false binary of believers (Shirky, 2008) versus non-believers (Morozov, 2011) puts aside the idea of the 'social' in 'social media'. Some people (but not everybody) indeed do come and form a public, but they do not simply under the conditions created by digital media. What makes a campaign popular and successful in the first place has nothing to do with digital technologies. Here it is really worth asking if a different campaign focusing on workers struggles, health service, poverty, or the religious minorities in Iran would have received such significant coverage. But, in addition to the question of the extent to which digital media creates new potentials and tools for liberation or domination, perhaps we can also ask what kind of politics are possible in a virtual environment, why, and to what effect? As I have argued, the success of the Stealthy Freedom campaign is impossible to comprehend and even imagine without considering the broader political and social struggle in Iran. It is also clear that even in the so-called 'deterritorialised' media environment, territories and their associated political and cultural histories shape and inform (or misinform) different aspects of digital campaigns.

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