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The Agonistic Social Media: Cyberspace in the Formation of Dissent and Consolidation of State Power in Postelection Iran

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In this article an attempt is made to rethink the phenomenon of emerging social media, not merely as a means of communication, but as social space wherein confrontational activities of political significance take place. How do political movements manifest new forums, promoting or resisting state power through social networking sites such as Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, or YouTube? How do states exert authority in the realm of digital activism? Unrest over official election results in Iran represents a case in which social media sites shape distinct sites wherein dissent is virtualized to challenge authoritarian rule, both offline and in cyberspace. Such cyberspaces of protest should be viewed in close connection with online governance through which the state can exert authority through surveillance operations, propaganda, and hacktivism. Online social media are agonistic arenas where information, ideas, values, and subjectivities are contested between (uneven) adversaries, and where new contexts could potentially emerge for new ways of doing politics.

June 7, 2009. It is five days before the 2009 presidential elections in Iran, the 10th in the history of the Islamic Republic since it was founded by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979. The supporters of Mir Husayn Mousavi, the reformist presidential candidate who seeks to defeat the hardline president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, receive disappointing news: The government has rejected their request to hold a major political rally in the Azadi stadium, the country's national sports complex with a capacity of 100,000 people.

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The interior ministry, in charge of supervising election campaigns, ruled out the possibility of such a rally because, according to officials, it could pose a major threat to national security just a few days before the national elections.

The refusal to grant permission to hold a rally at the Azadi stadium marked the first public attempt by the government to control the activities of Mousavi supporters since the campaign season commenced in May 2009. In the weeks before the elections, the political atmosphere had become relatively open as the government allowed anti-incumbent candidates to hold campaign events without considerable restrictions. With the new social openness, the supporters of Mousavi and Mehdi Karoubi, the other reformist candidate, swarmed the streets of Tehran by the thousands, turning everyday (and nightly) life into a party scene with their impromptu campaign songs and masquerade rallies. With a carnival-like attitude, young women would call for equality while young men debated, and at times engaged in bloody scuffles, with pro-Ahmadinejad supporters. In this election season, Tehran, and many other major cities around the country, had been transformed into extraordinary spaces of social interaction in a political ambience wherein one could freely express his or her discontent with the administration in power.

Although the cancellation of the Azadi rally was a disappointment to many Mousavi supporters, in the afternoon the campaigners, mostly men and women in their 20s and 30s, began to quickly organize another political rally; this time at a smaller sports complex in the heart of the capital city. How? Immediately after receiving news of the cancellation, the organizers began to discuss an alternative venue through text messaging, and in a matter of hours they had rescheduled the event at a different location. The following morning, when the permit was granted, the organizers of the rally began to immediately disseminate the news, first through text messaging, then by posting it on various social networking sites, especially Facebook, and later the news spread like wildfire through word of mouth.

The results were immediately felt. At noon, the stadium had become densely packed with Mousavi supporters. By four in the afternoon, the adjacent streets and a bridge overlooking the stadium became packed with people, mostly chanting anti-Ahmadinejad slogans. Clad in green—the symbolic color of the Mousavi camp representing both religious and nationalistic motifs—they began to form a massive street protest when the rally ended.¹

¹ The color green represents the sacred family of the Prophet who Shi'i Muslims, who make up the largest section of the Iranian population, revere. Green also symbolizes regeneration, associated with the festive culture of the Persian New Year celebrated in the beginning of spring. According to a member of the Mousavi camp, the color was introduced by a young campaigner in the winter of 2009 to energize Mousavi's political movement. Some have also suggested that it was Zahra Rahnavard, Mousavi's wife, who initially proposed the color as the symbol of the movement. For the movement, both in its campaign and postelection protest phase, the color served as a "symbol of protest" against the electoral results and the entire political system (Fischer, 2010, p. 363).

Suddenly, a political gathering that was originally organized and managed online had spread offline into the streets and public squares, where the everyday had been turned upside down into a carnival scene under the eyes of the authoritarian regime. The event was later recorded, televised, and posted online, bolstering emotional fervor and solidarity for the next day's political rally, with cyberspace presenting a participatory site for political mobilization.

In this article I want to argue that much of online political activism, especially the mobilization of dissent under authoritarian regimes, is dynamic and porous; and that such an ephemeral process carries the element of spontaneous creative interaction in the ways individuals can carve out new domains of communication through which dissent can be articulated and enacted in diverse ways. As a transient public, dissident activism in cyberspace occurs in the course of virtual encounters whereby individuals momentarily break out of their institutional realities in lived networks of interactions and form oppositional spaces in face-to-face settings such as street rallies. With social networking sites, this dynamic process intensifies through underlying sociocultural processes that creatively subvert the everyday notions of politics in the domain of unofficial or hidden public spaces of virtual life. The focus on social networks as spaces of interaction is, therefore, a theoretical attempt to overcome functionalist discourses that reduce new communication technologies such as the Internet to mere tools of communication that can simply be used for political activism. As the case of (post)election Iran shows, new forms of social media such as Facebook present inventive ways of practicing politics by shaping spaces of contestation. The theoretical framework on the spatial orientation of new social media is mainly informed by theories of contested spaces, which involve social exchanges, discourses, ideas, and images as loci for creating, challenging, and negotiating power relations that define social and political life.²

These newer forms of social opposition that posit a new relation between everyday public and virtual life cannot be seen as separate from how state power, especially under authoritarian rule, simultaneously exerts authority in cyberspace where dissent could endanger its stability. States thrive on some level of risk in order to maintain their monopoly on violence (e.g., military and security-intelligence apparatus), but they also need

² For a selection of such theoretical approaches on contested spaces, see studies by Hilda Kuper (1972), Gary McDonogh (1992), Steven Gregory (1998), and Daniel J. Walkowitz and Lisa Maya Knauer (2009), and for Internet studies see Ken Hillis (1999) and J. Naughton (2001). In this study my approach is similar to the work of Guobin Yang (2009) in that cyberspace and various types of online activism are closely viewed with a broader spectrum of social processes that involve particular sites of interaction that can involve the overlapping of virtual and physical spaces of shifting, living reality in what Henri Lefebvre called the "field of action" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 191).

to manage those risks that could potentially grow out of control. The Islamic Republic selectively enabled various social openings, especially prior to the elections, in order to legitimize its authority and, more importantly, supervise various spaces of dissent that might arise as a result of provisional freedoms granted to its citizens. Similar to China, proactive measures operate by adapting and creatively reproducing new technologies as innovative ways of controlling the digital realm. What the new media technologies, in particular the Internet, have ultimately provided for the state are new operative spaces to strategically reconfigure societal relations and political activism in favor of maintaining status quo.

In a theoretical sense, cyberspace involves spheres of strife (protest) and hegemony (power), wherein claims to information, ideas, values, and identities are contested and ruptured, leading to greater fragmentation of social relations in terms of network associations with linkages of a complex nature. The notion of “agonistic” social media is meant to underline this perpetual confrontation between conflicting forces that bring instability to political order, which may potentially lead to contexts for new ways of doing politics. The agonistic is, therefore, more than mere tension over interests and ideas, but the permanence of antagonism inherent to politics in the way that adversaries of uneven strength constantly bring into question final claims over power (Mouffe, 2000). Newer forms of social media have complicated the agonistics of political life in the articulation and staging of new contentious performances in the public sphere.

CYBERSPACE, DISSENT, AND STATE

In his famous criticism of televised media, Robert Putnam identified television as the main reason for the apparent decline of social capital in the United States and, subsequently, the deterioration of civic activism in democratic politics (Putnam, 1995). Pippa Norris, in contrast, argued that the decline of public engagement involved a number of factors that go beyond the sphere of televised culture and that one has to look at the content of programs watched and how it is creatively appropriated by individuals (Norris, 1996). The same argument can be applied to the Internet. It is not the Internet itself that limits or enhances civic life, but rather the way it is operated, developed, and creatively transformed by users who could potentially reshape their everyday surroundings according to their online activities. In the societal sense, cyberspace can also be viewed as a distinct sphere of virtual public wherein new discourses, activities, and, moreover, interventions of older media, take part in the formation of new public opinions (Downey & Fenton, 2003). Internet as public sphere, therefore, is about diversity of contacts and exchanges of ideas, or what Mark Poster (2004) called a “mode of information” (p. 399), producing heterogeneous and vying publics that eliminate barriers

to inclusion (Travers, 2003) and promote the possibility of wider access to information and interaction (Liff & Steward, 2003).

Since it was first developed in the 1960s, the Internet has emerged to represent a complex forum of communications as a network of computer connections. Through discussion boards, weblogs, distant learning, chat rooms and e-mails, digital communicative processes have continued to constitute a decentered network of cyber communication with linkages that challenge older forms of media with new outlets of complex interaction (Dimmick, Chen & Li, 2004; Leizerov, 2000). Unlike print or other information communication technologies, the Internet is relatively inexpensive and fast. It can also offer users the ability to recreate content and volume of electronic communication in what Poster calls the “underdetermination of new media” (Poster, 1999). Although its critics correctly underline the effective ways the Internet can open new ways of facilitating regulation and governance, as a communicative technology, cyberspace has increasingly developed into an interactive site of social networks (Wellman, 2001), whereby computer-mediated relations posit a wide range of discourses and practices that can inscribe in it and, in turn, dissolve the specificity of locality and territoriality of society in complex ways.

It is precisely this transregional networked and varied digital form of communication that has made the Internet become a potentially decentered space of political communication (Kellner 1999, p. 103). Online social networking sites best represent such a decentered dynamic, especially in the manifestation of small media in that diverse voices of marginalized status, whose perspectives often remain silent in mainstream media, are expressed and communicated, producing distinctive spaces of alternative utterances to realign the dominant public spheres on a global scale (Mitra, 2001). During the dawn of social networking in 1997, websites such as Match.com and Classmates.com presented a new online trend that set up new cyber relations to link people using their real identities through personal profiles, shaping private domains of linkages across a vast network of relations (Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 66–85). In the mid-2000s, Web 2.0 websites such as MySpace, Bebo, Friendster, Facebook, and especially Twitter, which is also a microblogging service, have developed into fast-paced interactive processes that reflect new ways of constructing social capital that may have implications of emerging new cultural projects and building communities, especially in the sphere of politics.

As for dissident cultural projects, social networking sites have proven to play a noteworthy role—although not a decisive one—in the realignment of political movements and promotion of political contestation, especially in societies under authoritarian rule. Although the Internet has, to a certain degree, increased pluralism and the relative expansion of civic participation in democratic contexts (e.g., Owen, 2006; Rheingold, 2002; Tolbert & McNeal 2003), it has also opened up new forms of dissident politics

under authoritarian rule, although not necessarily overthrowing the regimes (e.g., Chowdhury, 2008; Yang, 2009). The blogosphere best illustrates what Chadwick (2006) described as “democratized access to the tools and techniques required to make a political difference through content creation” (p. 129). In particular, blogs have enhanced motivation for political movements, especially among marginal societal segments (Brunsting & Postmes, 2002, p. 525), in bolstering civil society (Naughton, 2001). Political parties, especially those under Arab authoritarian regimes, have accordingly directed some of their activities toward building blogs and websites, creating new platforms for critical discussion of government policy or issues related to state legitimacy online (Howard, 2010, pp. 84–107; Lynch, 2007; Murphy, 2011, pp. 103–122). In the Arab uprisings in early 2011, for instance, banned political parties including Islamist dissidents participated in street demonstrations by organizing and mobilizing rallies online. Cyber activism continues to play an integral part in new Arab citizen activism, and the diversity and complexity of online tactics and strategies cannot be seen as detached from a broader spectrum of intertwining and competing cultural, economic, political, and social forces that are changing global life in unpredictable ways.

An integral aspect of this global process is the creative way of displaying contentious performances in the information public sphere that signals what Yang (2009) called the “multidimensional interactions” (p. 6) of online activism. This inventiveness was evident in the case of Mubarak-era Egyptian bloggers who innovatively launched boycotts and street demonstrations, and who posted narratives of protests against government policies, making virtual activism a feature of urban resistance under authoritarian rule in connection to other online activists around the globe (Fahmi, 2009). The potency of (unofficial) blogs in leading social upheavals can also be detected in the case of the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, where bloggers played a critical role in the coverage of the revolution online (Kulikova & Perlmutter, 2007). As the Ukrainian Orange Revolution also shows, online activism, together with mobile technology, helped civic activists advance spaces of dissent in forming “citizen journalism” and mobilizing demonstrations and other antigovernment activities (Goldstein, 2007, pp. 3–6).

However, as pessimists such as Evgeny Morozov correctly pointed out, there is also a hierarchical and dominative dimension to cyberspace (Morozov, 2009, 2010, 2011). In democratic societies, the Internet could jeopardize intermediary groups by producing “cyberapartheid” (Putnam, 2000, p. 175) and “global villages” (Habermas, 1998, pp. 120–121), wherein social actors can become closed off from one another, limiting the civic life of a political community. Information communication technologies can also serve as a tool for autocratic regimes to advance their offline censorship apparatus to propagate state ideologies, discredit their adversaries and, more dangerously, establish a system of surveillance. The *authoritarian deliberation*, as it has

been described by political scientists, operates as a set of tactical moves that selectively create social openings in order to create a semblance of transparency, but in fact monitor and, accordingly, stifle dissent (Baogang & Warren, 2011). In China, the state has in fact promoted the spread of the Internet in order to proactively enhance its power (Boas & Kalathil, 2003). By producing an Intranet software system, the Chinese government filters undesirable sites (Naughton, 2001, pp. 159–160) and has established a regime of surveillance online. In countries such as Saudi Arabia and Sudan, private Internet service providers (ISPs), funded by the government, limit access to various sites deemed unIslamic. The problem of the digital divide has also added level of accessibility to the Internet as a political space of interaction, as authoritarian states take advantage of the divide in order to lessen connectivity on local and national levels. The economic aspect reflects the increasing commercialization of cyberspace, wherein the market becomes the regulator of the Internet's assumed openness (Noam, 2003).

The key to understanding the Internet's political propensity therefore lies in how unequal factions (e.g., bloggers, civic associations, state) can compete against each other on a field of contention on which confrontational games between adversaries can be played out. Yet, such contested space is more than a mere game; it is a public place of intense social interaction where bonds and solidarities are constructed in fluid ways that enable political movements and state actors to produce various language games, performative and symbolic utterances that contest and invert relationships in correlation with other (offline) sites. As the Iranian case of (post)election politics of dissent best demonstrates, social network sites create such a spatial paradigm for political action by creating ambiguous experiences of *empowerment* and *disempowerment* amid shifting state and society relations.

THE GREEN MOVEMENT AND NEW SOCIAL MEDIA IN POSTELECTION IRAN

In the introduction, I provided a brief in-the-field account of the effect of social media on preelection urban Iran. This, of course, was not the first time the Internet had played a role in Iranian politics. When the new technology was initially introduced in the early 1990s, and Iranians became the second population in the Middle East (preceded only by Israel) to gain access to the Internet, opposition figures such as Ayatollah Husayn Ali Montazeri and journalists like Akbar Ganji posted antigovernment articles, memoirs, and letters online (Rahimi, 2008, pp. 45–46). As an increasing number of dissident writers chose cyberspace as an outlet for their discontent with the theocratic state, the Iranian blogosphere grew in size correspondingly with advancements in computer technology and a growing, educated, younger

population, reaching a crescendo in the latter period of Khatami's presidency (2001–2005; Hendelman-Baavur, 2007). While the expanding mobile and computer market began to affect the sociocultural life of Iranian youth (Basmenji, 2005, pp. 50–57) and the mushrooming of Internet cafés in the late 1990s reflected the transformation, the expansion of state repression in response to the electoral victory of the reformists, who aimed to change considerable institutions of the Islamic Republic, led to the advent of a distinct cyberspace form of dissident activities. Blogs presented not only the most accessible, immediate, and personalized forum of contestation (Khiabany & Sreberny, 2010) but also served as an “emergent genre” as a new cultural practice of dissident politics (Doostdar, 2004, p. 653).

In light of the rapid changes in Iran's communication technology in the late twentieth century, cyberspace emerged as an ingredient of the vibrant Iranian oppositional public sphere that has existed in Iran since the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911 (Dabashi, 2010, p. 135). Tied with the spread of telegraph, radio, print press, television, and cassettes, the Iranian public sphere has historically fostered various political movements from the early 1950s under Mohammad Mossadeq to the 1979 Islamic Revolution under the Pahlavi reign (Mohammadi & Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1994). In the post-revolutionary period, print media, especially newspapers, became the most contested forum for debate over the legitimacy of the Islamic government during the reformist period (1997–2005; Shahidi, 2007). In the late 1990s, the emergence of the Internet led to a new conflict between judicial institutions of the state and online journalism (Shahidi, 2007, p. 107). As older spaces of dissent were increasingly choked off by the introduction of a new press law that restricted freedom of expression (Tarock, 2001, p. 590), the new technology appeared as an alternative and safe place to express dissent.

With the burst of new energy led by a youth constituency that overwhelmingly made its presence felt in electoral politics, the new platform led to unprecedented modes of interaction. The state's attempt to limit cyberspace through various censorship measures in the early 2000s provided considerable difficulty for the expansion of dissident activities online. Yet the Internet presented a powerful alternative space for opposition. The new technology helped various groups, ranging from women's rights organizations to reformist religious factions, mobilize virtual civic spheres of contentions that aimed to “defy authoritarian control over the ideas of civil society and symbols of justice” (Gheyntanchi & Rahimi, 2008, p. 47). It also facilitated a public domain of critical discussion through which new political ideas were advanced and contested by diverse groups, including supporters of the state.

The expansion of online and offline social networking in the course of the 2009 presidential elections was predicated on the preceding 2001 and 2005 presidential elections, together with local and parliamentary elections,

characterized by a youth constituency that overwhelmingly made its presence felt in electoral politics (Gheissari & Nasr, 2006, pp. 128–158). The previous elections entrenched a political culture that was competitive, organized in campaign building and yet transgressive in terms of breaking certain cultural taboos such as staging carnival-like events by the younger generation amid urban spaces during campaign season (Gheissari & Nasr, 2006, p. 157). The constitutive feature that linked politics with Internet was the demographic transformation across gender and class, characterized by a young generation with no memory of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (Semati, 2008, p. 7). Despite the rise of neoconservatives to power in 2005, Iranian electoral politics had underscored a growing decentralization of political activism that relied less on political elites and more on grassroots campaigning, which included the mobilization of a large segment of the youth population and lower income groups, especially in the provinces (Gheissari & Sanandaji, 2009, pp. 287–291).

Such decentralization began to crystallize in the 1999 student uprising and eventually reappeared as a new protest cycle in the aftermath of the 2009 elections, made explicit in the protest discourse of electoral fraud with the reelection of Ahmadinejad. The 2009 campaign season provided an opening for the opposition to reassert itself, with hopes of a repeat of the 1997 reformist triumph with the overwhelming support of the electorate. Street protests shook the streets of Tehran and other major cities, spurred by those forces that saw an opportunity to challenge the administration and hence advance the reform project to strengthen the state's popular institutions and elevate Iran's prestige in world politics (Saikal, 2009, pp. 98–99). Relatively decentralized and self-organized (Fischer, 2010, p. 364), the Green Movement, as a social movement of diverse cultural, religious, and socioeconomic makeup with repertoires of collective action in pursuing civil rights, proved to be spontaneous and innovative (Dabashi, 2009). Inventive civil disobedience tactics, including the creative use of symbols and slogans (Gheytanchi, 2010; Manoukian, 2010), brought into full view the refusal to grant normalcy to a state that had denied protesters the right to dispute election results. In a remarkable way, during the early stages when the movement heavily relied on street protests (Hashemi, 2011, p. 404), the Internet emerged as a contested site in auxiliary to other traditional forums of protest that largely took place in city spaces and, to a much lesser extent, print media. In the later stages, weeks after the election, as daily street protests led to nightly protests on the house roofs or underground city spaces such as subways, cyberspace became more of a camouflage site for subversive activities. What follows is based on observations gathered in the field. Bearing in mind that such methodological findings are limited by the element of uncertainty in the volatile situation on the ground, this short narrative can serve as a snapshot of what took place weeks after the elections.

In the earliest stages, two days after the elections, the protests were largely street based. With the model of the 1979 revolution in the minds of many protestors, including state security forces, demonstrations were organized in various urban centers with all of the suggestive symbols from the previous revolution. As marches continued on June 15, the protesters posted or watched videos of the demonstrations and police brutality on their computers or cell phones. The spread of police attacks on the demonstrators caught the interest of a global audience, especially in the United States and Europe, as major media outlets including CNN and the BBC began to frequently televise clips and photos. With the clampdown on domestic journalists, a ban on foreign reporters, and escalation of repressive measures against the protestors in the week after the elections, social networking sites gave rise to what Dabashi (2010) described as the “exponential expansion of the public domain into cyberspace, to the point that it has had a catalytic, and arguably overwhelming, effect on physical space” (p. 135). The overlapping of cyber with physical space marked a unique stage in the protests that, somewhat mistakenly, gave rise to the notion of “cyber revolution” or “Twitter revolution” in certain Western media outlets (Reese, 2009). In what Setrag Manoukian called the “crisis of representation,” the confluence of street protest participation and citizen reportage created new “spatiotemporal coordination,” which created new subjective ways of perceiving, narrating, and inserting meaning to the unfolding events (Manoukian, 2010, pp. 247–250). Cyberspace did not serve as an engine that ran the street protests; rather, it was the overlapping of oppositional activities in both physical and virtual spaces that produced a networked social movement that was both hidden and visible, corporeal and yet simulated. As new repertoires, symbols and imageries of the protest movement, photographs, videos, and texts that depicted street protests became events themselves, creating a new cyber discourse of rupture that destabilized objective and reliable news.

While weblogs and political websites provided protesters with access to alternative news and allowed them to express their concerns and views online, Facebook, YouTube, and other Persian-speaking sites such as Balatarin.com created a vast yet clandestine social network through which dissidents cooperated and communicated among each other during the heated days of protest. Twitter may have appeared to play an innovative role in the dissemination of minute-by-minute information on the protests, but its role inside Iran was significantly limited to a small number of Iranian protesters who used the site during the postelection period (Howard, 2010, p. 9). Persiankiwi provided a distinct twittering forum for protesters and journalists to share information (Christensen, 2009), although most likely the surge of Twitter postings in the postelection period was produced by Iranian diaspora based in North America and Europe. While the increasing mediatized nature of the postelection protests was characterized by its

somewhat covert nature, even months after the elections, the state media would publically describe the existence of such social networking sites as the “hidden enemies” and tools of foreign agents (Esfandiari, 2009).

In retrospect, postelection cyberdissent became manifest in four critical directions: (a) transparency, (b) mobilization, (c) solidarity, (d) and hacktivism. As for transparency, postelection social networking is mostly known for posting clips and photos of street protests, with the clip of Neda Agha Soltan’s tragic death representing the most dramatic example. This new kind of citizen journalism bespoke the immediacy of cyberactivism and how pictures or videos of clashes could, in a matter of minutes, circulate the globe on both the Internet and in televised media and later return to Iran where they would be watched by protestors who would become more motivated to return to the streets the following day. This circulation from street protests to global audience and back to Iran would encourage protestors to generate their own (unedited) news, photos or videos, and post them on user-generated sites such as CNN’s iReport (“Big Jump in CNN’s Citizen Journalism Reform From Iran,” 2009, p. 1), injecting a new vitality into the social movement that faced an onslaught of negative campaigns by the state’s televised and print media. Yet the objective of covering the events on the ground was to make them more transparent. With the technique of routing the flow of information through proxy servers, the new torrent of i-news reports would ultimately shape social networks into sites of multidirectional communication, with the potential of promoting a culture of rumors and conspiracy theories, most evident at times of political crisis.

The relation between social networking and mobilization in unrest is less significant than dissemination of news in the form of street journalism. Websites such as Mousavi1388, YouTube election channels, Flickr, and various sites on Facebook played a critical role in the mobilization of antigovernment activists prior to the elections (Gheytauchi & Rahimi, 2009). Mousavi’s campaign used them in creating “waves” (“Moej Afarini”) in spreading information on rallies and proliferating political discussions. In the postelection period, these sites, however, played a marginal role in mobilizing protests. The decline of online activism was due partly to the fact that many sites were blocked in the weeks after the elections. While many used proxies to access these sites, some of which were provided to the protesters by the Iranian diaspora community through email, the filtering regime made its effect on the protesters’ ability to effectively organize rallies online. In the weeks following the elections, Facebook, Balatarin, and Donbaleh played more of a role in the dissemination of information rather than mobilization, as protesters would circulate Karoubi and Mousavi statements through their personal sites, at times copying and pasting antigovernment letters and declarations by various dissidents and spreading them among like-minded individuals online. However, only a few remarkable cyber waves led to

major street demonstrations on the Quds Day (September 18, 2009) and the religious day of Ashura (December 27, 2009). The success of these two particular events was partly due to the state's inability to gather information on the protesters or to inject misinformation online, as it successfully managed to do later on February 11, 2010, for the failed rally on the 31st anniversary of the Islamic Republic.

Yet, it is precisely with the spread, circulation and reframing of news, ideas and oppositional statements, images and symbols of protest that the Green Movement began to grow as a virtual community of dissidents. As the size of the street protests began to wane with the increase of crackdowns and surveillance, cyberspace presented an online community of diverse voices that shared a common language and symbolic genre of protest. The mediation of political culture of dissent in the form of community building can be characterized by the notion of *deconstruction of social boundaries*, a process that enables individuals to reshape their everyday social relations (e.g., gender, class) into new imagined communities with emotive links in virtual space (Slevin, 2000, pp. 100–101). In many ways, the mitigation of political boundaries fosters new relations of virtual interactivity on the basis of emotive ties or what Mousavi would refer to as *mohabbat va olfat-e ijtema'i* or “social empathy and affinity” (Dabashi, 2010, p. 132). The activists who obscure their offline boundaries by participating in various social websites in support of the Green Movement tend to see their cause as continuing to defy state repression, as it aims to sustain the apparent decline in the momentum of the movement in the dynamics of online activism. The creation of various pro-Mousavi online sites such as “100 million Facebook members for Democracy in Iran” or wall posts, together with cross-linking of antigovernment e-news via e-mail and text messaging, underscores the networking dynamics of building solidarity and a distinct kind of virtual community.

As texting and online postings overshadowed protests at the street level, and as the state flexed its muscle against the opposition, cyber activism also became more confrontational. Although its definition is highly contested (Nissenbaum, 2004), hacktivism partly refers to the digital reappropriation of cyberspace through assaults on websites deemed to represent the powers that be. Two forms of hacktivisms prevailed in Iranian cyberspace. First, in the earlier stages of the protests, online opposition involved the defacing of certain government websites such as Fars News, Keyhan News, IRIB, Ahmadinejad's homepage and the website of the supreme leader (www.leader.ir). Through techniques such as constant denial of service attacks, government websites were brought down, marked with the error message “server is too busy.” Meanwhile Google bombs appeared in the form of links to pages with antigovernment slogans (e.g. “Ahmadinejad is not my president 2009”), while other redirecting techniques were employed to intercept online traffic for a designated website, bringing attention to an antigovernment slogan or statement.

Second, postelection hacktivism included the production of various software and techniques for the use of non-export users in an attempt to unblock a number of sites, especially Facebook and BBC Persia, denied by the state monitored private ISPs. Groups and individual hackers, mostly based outside of Iran such as the San Francisco-based Censorship Research Center, played a role in this process, as they produced antifiltering software to “hide the user’s real Internet identity while allowing access to widely-used networking” (Memarian, 2010, para. 3). Although the Censorship Research Center’s project ultimately failed because of security factors, a number of antifilter software programs, possibly provided by the International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB) service Voice of America (Telecommunications in Iran, 2010, p. 11), continue to be used to navigate around prohibited sites. For example, Iranproxy, a major Internet website, has distributed more than 80 million sets of free software (Nouri, 2010). The collective action of hacktivism underlines a unique kind of warfare that continues to take place in virtual space, inviting a new wave of counterattacks by the state.

Social Networking the Islamic Republic

The spread of oppositional hacktivism dramatically altered the conservatives’ response to antigovernment cyber activities. While the Islamic Republic had known the challenges of regulating the Internet since the late 1990s, when the new medium began to be increasingly used by Iranian dissidents, postelection cyberactivism came to be viewed as a type of cyberwarfare led by foreign agents, namely Britain and the United States (Nouri, 2010). In addition to various filtering techniques, including the launch of cyber attacks on a number of Green Movement websites, including Facebook, the postelection period marked a new confrontational stage in the use of proactive measures to stifle dissident activities online. Much of the policy of content regulation, especially among through the judicial institution, expanded into building new progovernment virtual spaces wherein the official culture could be propagated, made visible and, accordingly, legitimize state power. The reinvention of power in cyberspace was aimed at creating shared political understandings of self and community that would, first, compete with the opposition and, second, allow the formation of “coherent and regulated social groups” (Reid, 1999, p. 132) with a common ideological perception.

This development revealed a new phase in the Islamic Republic’s history of online governance. In the late 1990s, when the popularity of the Internet began to soar as a newly recognized medium of communication and exchange of information with considerable regional and global reach for Iranian society, especially among the younger generation, state-led censorship measures largely included reactive attempts to filter Internet activity, arresting web designers and enacting restrictions on the ISPs. In a significant way, ISPs have been required to maintain data on their clients,

including instant messaging and other interactive sites (Telecommunications in Iran, 2010, p. 12). Similar to Cuba and Saudi Arabia, the regime monitored online activities and prevented the flow of information by establishing state-run Internet sites while limiting private sector access to cyberspace. When Iran saw the reelection of the reformist Khatami, control over the Internet expanded and in January 2002 the supreme council ordered its most important censorship measure in the form of a commission to create a list of illegal sites to shut down. At the same time, the judiciary chief, Ayatollah Shahroudi, called for the “establishment of a special committee for legal investigation of Internet-related crimes and offenses,” and launched the creation of a new legal office (Gheytauchi & Rahimi, 2009, para. 6). The victory of Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential election led to the expansion of online censorship. While neoconservatives had a tight grip on the public sphere through conservative legal machinery, Iranian bloggers and online journalists began to face increased pressures. With the arrest and eventual execution of a number of bloggers between 2008 and 2009, together with the sophisticated use of filtering systems, it became obvious that the state had begun to draw the boundaries of Iranian cyberspace through top-down measures to regulate content and propagate state ideology.

The emergence of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the paramilitary force in charge of protecting the Islamic Republic, in the expansion of online governance between 2006 and 2009 marked a significant phase, as the intelligence services gained more authority over control of the Internet. The development reflected the increasing securitization of the Iranian public sphere in light of multiple measures to curtail dissent. With the help of advanced technological espionage devices, including Nokia Siemens Systems’ deep packet inspections with the ability to monitor and change mail communication (Chao & Rhoads, 2009), the IRGC’s intelligence services expanded its activities in cyberspace. Months before the 2009 election, the newly formed intelligence unit, known as the Iranian Cyber Army, introduced the Gerdab (vortex) project, an intelligence gathering scheme with the aim to identify and locate antigovernment online activists. When Facebook was unblocked in the winter of 2009, the Iranian Cyber Army began to monitor pro-Mousavi activists and identify their linkages in various social networking sites.

With the postelection turmoil, two significant measures of control took place. The first tactic was to filter a wide range of websites, including CNN and Facebook. The measure was complemented with a considerable reduction of download speed from the usual 128kbits/s, aimed at reducing the flow of information, photos, and video clips leaving the country (see also Moghadam, 2010, p. 157). Second, the IRGC’s cyber unit launched its most sophisticated tactic of cyber intelligence gathering to date, injecting manufactured ideas, rumors, and statements about opposition leaders and their supporters to delegitimize and also create confusion among their

adversaries. The Iranian Cyber Army's pressure on network service providers to create and produce information (e.g., password via fake identities) or to spread misinformation served as an innovative measure to stifle dissent. The appearance of fake pro-Mousavi websites such as www.mirhoseyn.com, for instance, led to fear concerning the authenticity of numerous antigovernment sites created for the purpose of deceiving opposition activists into providing information that could lead to their detention.

The sociopsychological aspect of state-led cyber warfare was immediately felt weeks after the elections. Paranoia over the antifilter software tools, most likely caused by IRGC's attempt to monitor oppositional online activities, spread like wildfire. The growing perception of surveillance among antigovernment activists reflected the vulnerability of computer technology, as many Internet users were arrested for participating in what the regime deemed acts of sedition against the establishment (Deep Sedition Project, 2009). The hacking and defacing of opposition websites and social media such as Twitter was largely in response to hacktivism led by antigovernment activists (Bartz & Finkle, 2009), reflecting the contentious nature of cyberspace.

It was with the growth of progovernment social networking sites that the virtualization of the Iranian state underwent a transformation. While Basij (state militia), a major unit within the IRGC, had entered the Internet in the form of 10,000 bloggers since 2008 (Khiabany & Sreberny, 2010, p. 143), progovernment social networking rapidly grew after the 2009 elections in an offensive move against the Green Movement (Fowler & Rhoads, 2009). The arrival of Velayatmadaran (<http://velayatmadaran.ir>) signals the most advanced social networking site since the elections. The site is run by followers of the supreme leader and most of the discussions revolve around the divine legitimate right of Ayatollah Khomeini over the country (Esfandiari, 2009). With links to posted videos, photos, music, chat rooms and profiles of groups online, Velayatmadaran represents a unique social networking site, wherein discussions include a mixture of politics and religious themes. While most posted or copy-pasted reports or statements are progovernment in nature, online discussions are mostly of a religious nature, with some touching upon ethical issues related to gender relations. Like religious blogs that continue to redefine gender identity and rethink theological questions in individuated spaces (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008), the promotion of progovernment social networking sites marks a new attempt by the state to reshape Iranian cyberspace on a collective level, carving out new spaces wherein state power can be virtually displayed, discussed and promoted in competition with antigovernment social sites. In many ways, state online activism continues to expand into the virtual communal domain, wherein governance is no longer merely about regulating content but creating new subjectivities and a community of emotions with solidarity for the divine right of the supreme leader to maintain power.

CONCLUSION: INTERNET AS A CONTESTED DOMAIN OF A MYTHIC KIND

In his seminal book, *The Digital Sublime* (2004), Vincent Mosco claimed that cyberspace both represents and creates myths and symbols of human action, empowerment and power, and experiences of space and time, which “animate individuals and societies by providing paths to transcendence that lift people out of the banality of everyday life” (Mosco, 2004, p. 3). As an innovative site of interactivity where social networks are accelerated and yet fragmented into nodes of complex relations, cyberspace presents a social space with mythic force, wherein tropes of self and other, history and place, fissure and power take place. Online activism raises the stature of participating in cyberspace to what can be warranted as alternative ways of being in the world, alternatively imagined ways of building new identities and new worlds (Bell, 2001, p. 7). In political terms, like other older information communication technologies such as the telegraph, the new communication technology of the Victorian era (Standage, 1998), computer-mediated technology can be viewed as communicative spaces of interaction through which new forms of action can become possible in the course of perpetual conflict in a set of power relations.

From online reports from street rallies on YouTube to mobilization of protests on Facebook, the case of Iran demonstrates that cyberspace cannot only challenge state power, but also produces new senses that often reveal a new way of doing politics. Cyberactivists communicate tales of liberation and state tyranny in ways that often articulate felt histories and imagined futures of shared horizons. It is precisely this myth-making proclivity that makes the Internet attract utopian fervor. Yet, as postelection Iran also shows, such utopianism is perpetually marked with fluxes of dystopian forces. The notion of the virtualization of state identifies a creative process through which various modes of governance also include the formation of a virtual community of progovernment activists. Yet, it is precisely because of the ambiguous process of virtualization of citizen empowerment and virtualization of state power that cyberspace, as a social networking force, presents an agonistic space of interaction where volatile negotiations of the material (computer technology) and symbolic (narratives, visions, ideas, emotions) take place.

Moving away from cyber-utopianism and state dystopianism, this article underlined competing and at times contradictory social processes that identified cyberspace as a battle zone between adversaries of uneven strength. Because the agonistic model of politics is ultimately about the impossibility of absolute power, cyberspace, as distinct social space, presents a wavering space of contentious activities in which political activism is perpetually defined in innovative ways. It is precisely in the flowing force of digital space that new possibilities of political action could emerge with

changing information technologies. What characterizes the myth of social networking is the charting of unknown models of political activism born out of the vibrant world of virtual reality.

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