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## **Social media and environmental enthusiasts**

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- **Introduction**

New Media has significant impacts on social and cultural contexts of developing countries and creates new challenges in these contexts. Although many research centers have been established with respect to new communication technologies and new media in particular in developed countries, but these studies have not attracted attention of scholars in developing countries yet; despite exceptional impacts on society. Research on this topic is sporadic and there has not been significant research tradition. One of the most important impacts of digital media is impacts on social movements in specially environmental activism. Internet represents an attractive new opening for activists. Cyberspace offers room for expression in a relatively uninhibited space with low financial and social costs (Sullivan and Lei Xie,

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2009:424). In fact, with expansion of new media, environmental activities and campaigns have taken a new form and various discourses can easily spread in societies. In this paper, after briefly reviewing some theoretical considerations of new media, we will focus on a web-originated "Environment Cleaners Group" (ECG) which mobilizes environmental enthusiasts via social media. Regarding to our findings, we will have some arguments about the future of environmental activism in Iran. ECG is a group of volunteers for picking up trash from natural area and was founded by Kazem Najjarian. He created a page in Facebook with the campaign slogan of "*We will not throw garbage anymore.*" Now this group has branches in 31 provinces of Iran.

He was picking up trashes while visiting natural landscapes with his family. He has taken some pictures from trashes by his cell phone when he was visiting *Chooret Lake* at north of Iran and has posted and shared on Facebook. These photos were very welcoming. He created a page on Facebook called "Iranian Environment Cleaners Group" and has about 40 thousand members now.

It should also be noted that participatory approach is one of the important approaches in social impact assessment. In this approach the question is how to improve the life and reduce the environmental and urban issues by local community's involvement. This article seeks to identify how new media can facilitate community involvement in environmental issues.

- **Theoretical considerations**

There are different views about the role of new media. There is a consensus among most scholars that the new media have provided new opportunities and have opened new windows for social movements. In fact new media has

facilitated the emergence of media-oriented activism. online activist subcultures have materialized as a vital new space of politics and culture in which a wide diversity of individuals and groups have used emergent technologies in order to help produce new social relations and forms of political possibility(Kahn and Kellner,2004: 94). For many environmental NGOs, particularly small groups in their emergent phase, the web is a lifeline. Social networks amongst the activist population potentially act as a mechanism for coping with the absence of a formal and reliable system of laws and regulations (Sullivan and Lei Xie, 2009:425). These online networks connect individuals based on shared interests, activities or beliefs and offer public and private communication tools within a social networking space (Martinello, Donelle. 2012: 174). Scholars tend to view the internet's role in social movements as two-fold: the internet can facilitate traditional offline activism, enhancing a movement's existing repertoire by adding email campaigns, online petitions and even virtual sit-ins to activists' existing toolbox (Castells, 2001; Juris, 2005; Harlow, 2012), or it actually can create new forms of activism and resistance (Cardoso and Pereira Neto, 2004; Rolfe, 2005; Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2009; Harlow, 2012).

Despite all the positive analysis of the role of social media in activism, there are some doubts about the role of new media in strengthening of social movements. Some believe that the emergence of new media has led to solve problems through computer and mouse. They actually reinforce stay-at home, what they call online movements. Christensen attempts to summarize the viewpoints of those who are skeptical of the role of the new media as follows: 1. Internet activities are not effective; and, 2. Internet activists do not engage in other activities (Christensen, 2011). In fact these controversial theoretical dispute or debate is related to two functions of social media: slacktivism or

collectivism. In other word, the possibility of online activism transformation to offline activism is the issue in dispute. In this paper we will show the positive role of social media in environmental activity and campaign. This paper aims to answer this question, whether Social media help expand the environmental movement in Iran? Can virtual campaign and activism transform to actual activism?

- **Method**

Relying on the web-content of ECG's site and Facebook pages, as well as interviews with peoples who participated in its events, data were collected for this study. The authors also participated in several events organized by the ECG for an in-depth exploring of its activity. Our main question was that how did the participants know group? Did a social media such as Facebook have a role in it? The researchers gradually became friends with participants and they added them to their Facebook page friends. As a result, we could identify the role of Facebook in mobilizing members in a better way. In this study, 40 participants in ECG events were interviewed. The researchers also participated in 7 events of ECG.

- **Findings**

The research findings show that the most of this group members are young and educated. The participation of women in the group's activity is very remarkable. Social media especially Facebook is the most important tool for coordinating and organizing of the volunteers. Facebook is the virtual office of the group and the group has not a dedicated office space. In other words, Facebook is the most important channel of contact with group members, but coordinators use other tools and devices for influencing on policy-makers and

officials. Our findings support optimistic view about the impacts of new media on social movements. The smart phones users are increasing in Iran. It is expected that due to the seriousness of environmental issues, the number of virtual environments will increase in the future.

This study shows that social media can shape and provide a good ground for new environmental activism. The case which is being studied here shows that on-line movements (virtual) can lead to off-line (actual) activism. Due to the worsening situation of environmental issues in Iran and Iranians' appeal toward social media, it is expected that the government will be faced with more pressure for accountability and transparency in environmental issues.

In developing countries, social and political structure is a bit difficult for a social practitioner to get various views of communities toward the issues. New media allows that social practitioners easily go to social media pages and monitor opinions. One of the challenges of social impact assessment in developing countries has been poor information about the projects and their impacts. Social media have led to the flow of information more quickly, and this leads to more public awareness.

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