Article

"We Will Either Find a Way, or Make One": How Iranian Green Movement Online Activists Perceive and Respond to Repression

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Abstract

While studies on the effect of repression of online activism mainly focus on the capabilities of states in surveillances and filtering on the web, this article focuses on individuals' responses to repression. Using data gathered by in-depth interviews of online activists of the Iranian Green Movement—the pro-democracy movement which emerged after the disputed 2009 elections—this article attempts to shed light on online activism under repression. The article focuses on two questions: How do activists perceive repression? How do they respond to repression? The research distinguishes three dimensions of perceived repression which interactively influence activists' choices in their response to repression: the importance of the repression, the external assessment of this repression, and the internal assessment. Regarding the response to repression, five distinct strategies are identified (1) de-identification, (2) network reformation, (3) circumvention, (4) self-censoring, and (5) being inconspicuously active. The study has a number of important theoretical and empirical implications for future studies on repression and online activism under authoritarian contexts.

Keywords

online repression, response to repression, online activism, perceived repression, Iranian Green Movement

Introduction

In June 2009, millions of protesters took to the streets of Tehran and some other large cities in Iran to challenge the results of the presidential elections. Along with street demonstrations and other forms of offline activities, several forms of online activities took place, to the extent that commentators referred to it as "Iran's Twitter Revolution" (2009). During this so-called "digitally networked" protests (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) against the disputed elections, the Iranian Green Movement (hereafter IGM) emerged with a prodemocracy inclusive frame *"Where is my vote?"*

Through severe repression, the government attempted to silence the movement. Yet, the massive demonstrations continued for 8 months, relying on the heavy use of social media for mobilization and coordination. Eventually, at the end of 2009, the cycle of street demonstrations reduced. During the subsequent year, when there were no calls for street demonstrations, some more individualized forms of offline activities (such as writing political messages on the wall or cash money) and online activities (such as campaigning, blogging, and petitioning) came to the fore (Honari, 2013). Increasing online activities of the IGM coincided with the substantial growth of the practice of state repression on the Internet (Bailey & Labovitz, 2011; Ghobadiha & Clegg, 2015; Khazraee & Losey, 2016). This was followed by the gradual decline of online and offline activities. Toward the end of 2012, one could see a halt to the IGM activism.

Unexpectedly, only a couple of weeks before the 2013 presidential elections, after 2 years of silence on the streets, the IGM rose up again (Harris, 2013; Honari & Muis, 2014). The movement's activists, particularly grassroots and young activists, became active—mainly online—to support voting for a moderate candidate (Kadivar, 2013). These activities yielded a significant shift in the Iranian political landscape by making

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Hasan Rouhani president, which had an important impact on domestic and foreign policy (Kadivar & Honari, 2015).

In a nutshell, despite the fact that after the emergence of the 2009 Green Movement protests "increasingly complex surveillance and monitoring techniques, complementing technical filtration tools with legal frameworks and information manipulation" were adopted by the government (Carrieri, Karimzadeh Bangi, Khan, & Suud, 2013, p. 3), online activities of IGM supporters continued and remained decisive. How can we account for the IGM supporters' sustained online activism despite severe state repression over the period between 2009 and 2013?

The literature on the effect of repression on online activism largely focuses on surveillance and the repressive capabilities of the Web (for instance, see: Morozov, 2011). This literature, assuming repression as synonymous with cost, tends to explain online activities as the function of (lack of) state repression, ignoring how activists perceive and respond to repression. Yet, state repression is not necessarily perceived in a similar way by all individuals. Nor do all individuals who experience a similar context have a similar response (see also van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013; Viterna, 2006). In this article, to make sense of online resistance under repression, I put the strategic responses of activists center-stage, and focus on activists' perceptions of and responses to repression.

I suggest that online activists' assessments of the risk of activities greatly vary and are usually not synonymous with objective state repression. Moreover, online activists have an array of choices to respond to repression, and each choice results in different outcomes of repression. To this end, this article goes beyond focusing on objective state repression, toward individuals' subjective perceived repression and their choices in responding to repression in the digital era. In contrast to most studies focusing on constraints on activists and seeing repressive states as having agency, this article pays much more attention to the agency of people. More specifically, it focuses on influential online activists or "soft leaders" of IGM's collective actions (Gerbaudo, 2012). Using in-depth semi-structured interviews with Iranian online activists, two questions will be discussed here (1) *How do IGM online activists perceive repression?* and (2) *How does that influence their response to it*?

By doing so, I link repression studies with social media and social movements studies. While the impact of social media on social movements in repressive contexts, particularly after the so called Arab Spring, has received significant attentions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Castells, 2012; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012), the relevance of the concept of "repression" to and its place within the growing body of the literature has not been defined yet.

Throughout this article, state repression of online activism (for brevity, online repression hereafter)—in line with Davenport's (2005) definition of state repression—refers to actions taken by authorities against individuals and/or groups

to restrict online activism. From the individuals' perspective, I make a distinction between "experienced online repression" (e.g., being arrested or being forced to flee out of the country by authorities because of online activities, having emails intercepted or data stolen, and website/blogs filtered or removed by authorities), and "perceived online repression" which refers to the perception of individuals about structural obstacles and individual risk caused by the state repression of online activism (Honari, 2018). In line with Van Deth (2014), in this article, online activism refers to voluntary activities of citizens which take place online and are targeted at the sphere of government. Online activism encompasses participation in "Internet-based protests" (such as participation in Twitter storms, signing an online petition and hacking), online efforts to mobilize offline (such as sharing contents/media items to encourage others to participate in a protest) (van Laer & van Aelst, 2010), and "clicktivist acts" (such as using social media buttons "like" or "favourites," creating a meme, and changing a profile picture) (Halupka, 2014).

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The next section concerns a theory of the effect of repression on online activism. Next, my data consisting of 26 interviews with IGM activists and the data-gathering procedure will be introduced. The results section presents and analyses the findings of the interviews. Finally, the findings will be combined into a larger picture followed by discussions and suggestions for future studies.

Theoretical Background

In recent years, online activism has attracted significant academic attention, particularly with regard to its impact on political protests and social movements in repressive contexts (Farrell, 2012). The Internet has been generally characterized as a low-cost and low-risk milieu for political activism (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012; Earl & Kimport, 2011). This has shaped the dominant explanation of online activities in repressive contexts. It is argued that the low cost of communicating and organizing of political activists on the Internet is conducive to being politically active online under severe repression (Howard, 2011; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Shirky, 2008). In the same vein, viewing repression as synonymous with cost, it is increasingly argued that if online repression increases, online activities will decline (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011); so the literature assumes a deterrence effect of repression on online activism (Earl & Beyer, 2014). Yet, as Lynch (2011, p. 306) states on the protest wave of 2011 in the Arab world, "state uses and abuses of the Internet do not guarantee the success of repression." In other words, the effect of online repression on online activism varies and is not limited to deterrence effect. Thus, it is necessary that the long-standing debate in the academic scholarship about repression effects (for reviews, see

Davenport, 2005; Earl, 2011) expands into digitally networked social movements (Earl & Beyer, 2014).

Repression Effects

Repression scholars have long been grappled with the complication of repression effect. Some scholars have concluded that repression negatively affects social movements (Boykoff, 2006; Ellefsen, 2016; Wood, 2007), whereas others have found that it enhances the intensity of protests (Almeida, 2008; McAdam, 1990). Yet, others have argued that it generally has a non-linear effect (Khawaja, 1993; Opp, 1994), or leads to alternative forms expressing political discontent (i.e., tactical shift; Francisco, 1996; Lichbach, 1987). A few studies that have investigated the effect of repression on online activities also found similar contradictory findings in different cases: deterrence effect of state repression (Pearce & Kendzior, 2012; Varnali & Gorgulu, 2015), no significant effect (Mou, Atkin, & Fu, 2011), backlash effects (Postigo, 2010), and escalation effects (Earl & Beyer, 2014).

While these studies highlighted variation in the consequences of state repression (Earl, 2011) and proposed different type of relationships between repression and political activism, they fail to explain why the effects are contradictory. In fact, these studies provide insights into what state repression has done to online activism, while ignoring how people cope with and respond to repression. Paying attention to responses to repression provides fuller account for repression effects (Honari, 2018; Moss, 2014). Indeed, opening the black box of individuals' choices in response to repression provides a micro-level foundation to better understand the macro-level phenomena of variation in repression effect (Coleman, 1990). To lay a foundation for such understanding in social media activism, this article investigates (1) perceived repression of online activists and (2) choices online activists make in response to perceived repression.

Perceived Repression

Klandermans (1984) argues that individuals decide to participate or not on the basis of the perceived costs/risks and benefits of participation. From one individual to another, the perceived costs and benefits of a certain activity can greatly vary.

Two approaches are recognizable in the existing conceptualization of perceived repression. In some studies, the term (perceived) repression is used to describe the subjective assessment of contextual factors of state repression (Opp & Roehl, 1990) or the violation of human rights (Anderson, Regan, & Ostergrad, 2002; Booth & Richard, 1996). In other studies, perceived repression is conceptualized as the assessment by individuals of the risk taken as a result of their own political activities (Opp, 1994). This has led to a variation in the operationalization of perceived repression. To measure the perceived repression of individuals, surveys ask respondents, for instance, "whether they [believe] the amount of violence in their society to be low, medium or high" (Booth & Richard, 1996, p. 1210), or "[t]o what degree [they] believe there is respect for individual human rights nowadays in [their] country" (Anderson et al., 2002, p. 445), or how they evaluate police action (Opp & Roehl, 1990). On the other hand, the assessment by respondents of the risk of their actions is measured by questions asking the probability of facing some sort of "state repression" such as being arrested, being hurt by security forces, and being harassed at their place of work (Opp, 1994). Both approaches shed light on the effect of the severity of perceived repression, whether as contextual (external) or individual (internal) repression, on the intensity of activism. However, a more nuanced understanding of these two different dimensions of perceived repression may be useful for accounting for the variation in findings of both approaches.

As Maher (2010, p. 255) explained, in repressive contexts "states often intentionally limit information about structural changes." This lack of reliable information about state repression sometimes makes that activists' perception of state repression is unrelated to the actual level of state repression (Kurzman, 1996). This implies that it is necessary to distinguish "objective" repression, in other words what states do, and "subjective" repression, which is what individuals perceive (Kurzman, 1996; Wiltfang & McAdam, 1991). Hence, in this study, to better account for the effect of state repression on online activism, I first aim to scrutinize *how IGM online activists perceive online repression*.

Refrain From Activities or Resist Repression

Most studies on repression focus on constraints on individuals and do not see individuals as having *agency*. Yet, even under severe repression people still have agency, that is, despite repression (i.e., constraints), individuals have some sort of capability to act independently (i.e., agency). Under vast sophisticated online control in China and Iran, online activism regularly happens. Even under very tough regulations, hacktivism is common (Fuchs, 2015; Milan, 2015). In fact, in response to repression, while some may reduce their activities or *refrain* from any activities, others continue and *resist* repression. Many of the repression studies at the micro-level focus on the question of under repression why some refrain from activities but some resist limited to participation and nonparticipation in protests. Once people opt to resist repression, they can choose between available strategies.

Strategies to Resist Repression

Existing research on repression tends to focus on overt public forms of political activities. However, I argue that activists under repression can engage in a broader form of political participation (including covert activities), and use multiple strategies to manage the risks and to resist repression. Strategies have been defined as "a plan of collective action

intended to accomplish goals within a particular context" (Maney, Kutz-Flamenbaum, Rohlinger, & Goodwin, 2012, p. xvii). Strategies can be collective and supplied by leaders and organizations, or can be adopted individually through individual decisions. Identifying different strategies, thus, provides a broader picture of activities under repression and includes activities that are not public and disruptive but widespread and crucial. These lesser-known activities do not appear on the radar without focusing on the micro level (Johnston, 2012). It is valuable to investigate strategies that activists have at their disposal (repertoire of strategies) to respond to repression.

To this end, to account for how online activists resist repression, the second aim of the paper is to identify the distinct strategies that *IGM online activists adopted to respond to online repression.*

Methods

The primary data for this paper are 26 in-depth interviews with IGM activists which were conducted between March and May 2013. I interviewed online activists who were actively involved in online activities of the IGM, and at the time of the interviews lived either inside ($N=16$) or outside Iran ($N=10$). By IGM online activists, I refer to individuals who participated in IGM online protests/campaigns taking place on the Internet and/or used the Internet to support IGM in mobilization, organization, and so on. These IGM online activists are formal activists if they are members of a brick and mortar organization/party constituting the IGM otherwise I define them as informal activists.

Conducting research with a qualitative method, interviewing or field research in the Middle East is challenging (Clark, 2006; Romano, 2006), as it is in other authoritarian political contexts (Osa, 2003). The greatest challenges involved contacting interviewees and considering ethical issues (Clark, 2006; Cohen & Arieli, 2011; Romano, 2006). Snowball sampling addresses the challenges in recruiting interviewees such as a lack of contact information, cultural differences, and the difficulties of an "atmosphere of fear and distrust" (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). I was fortunate that I had several years of political activism in Iran that helped to overcome those challenges. I knew a large and diverse group of activists involved in IGM personally, in particular young activists, which eased trust-building. As other researchers have recognized in post-2009 Iran (Saeidi & Rivetti, 2017), our intimacy allowed the activists to be open about their opinions. I also was familiar with the activist culture, which helped me to have a practical ethical consideration of the consequences of being interviewed about activism. Relying on my access advantage, I used a mixture of snowball sampling and purposively approaching interviewees. I selected an initial sample of eight activists from my own network, and then asked them to nominate one or two other activists who were active in any

period after the emergence of the IGM. In my sample selection, I attempted to diversify my interviewees in terms of the level and form of their online activities, their political attitudes, the online network/political party they were/are mostly embedded in/affiliated with (informal and formal activists). Needless to say, it is hard to tell to what extent my convenience sample accurately represents the total population of IGM activists. The young and well-educated are probably overrepresented in my sample, but the knowledge that I obtained through a long-term and deep engagement in online activism from the emergence of IGM to 2013 enabled me to get an appropriate sample.

I used Skype interviews to overcome the difficulty of physical accessibility. As all the interviewees had engaged in online activities to some extent, they were already familiar with secure call conversations through Skype. Skype also itself offers transport encryption, so that others spying on the network cannot read and listen to it ("Communicating With Others," 2017). However, to be assured about the security of the conversations before each interview, I checked and asked interviewees about the security of their Internet connection. For the sake of ethical concerns, at the beginning of the interviews, I introduced myself, the university, and the purpose of my research. I also explained how I had got the interviewee's name or why I had chosen to interview them. I not only promised the anonymity of the interviewee during the interview and in the report of the study, but also recommended the interviewees to not say anything linking the interview to their identity.

Skype interviews ($N=24$) or face-to-face interviews ($N=2$) ranged between 37 min and over 2 hr ($M=1{:}17{:}07$). All interviews were conducted by the author. They were transcribed, coded, and analyzed in their original language (Persian). Summaries and exemplary quotes were translated into English. Interview files and transcripts were stored anonymously, and interviewees are mentioned throughout the paper by pseudonyms sometimes together with a code, gender, age, formal or informal activists, and location (e.g., Sajjad, Int 26, M, 30, formal activist, a large city in southern Iran).

The semi-structured interview scheme was designed to cover a range of topics, including political background, the form of activities, and motivations. Most relevant to this article were core questions in the middle of the interview that queried online activities. These pieces of text were coded, using the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti. First, I flagged any part of the interview that was related to the topic of interest. Then, I coded and categorized each flagged part on the basis of the study's research questions.

Results

In the following sections, I first address the question of how online activists perceived repression, and then I elaborate on how activists respond to repression.

How IGM Online Activists Perceived Repression

My interviewees, while referring to obstacles and risks to their online activities, that is, online repression, pointed to three different dimensions of perceived repression: (1) the assessment of external repression, (2) the assessment of internal repression, and (3) the importance of repression. The interaction of these three dimensions of perceived repression shapes their perceived repression and their consequent decisions about response to repression, in particular whether to resist repression or refrain from online activities.

Importance: Variation in the Importance of Risks Among Activists. My interviewees experienced a wide range of state repression: Most of them had been arrested, sentenced to prison, or forced to flee the country. They also always grappled with assessing the risk of their activities. However, "the importance of risk" varies among them (Ayanian & Tausch, 2016). What activists are concerned about and what is important to them is different and the level of importance is different too. For instance, while for some not returning to Iran is personally important, for others, family problems concern them the most. While for some no risk is bearable, for others even a couple of weeks being detained is acceptable:

> I prepared myself for a reasonable cost. [The government] usually arrest the activists, 3 to 4 weeks of interrogation, and then they free them on bail, or give them a suspended sentence, and hold this over your head so that you wouldn't do anything anymore. I was ready for this. It didn't seem too scary to me when I looked at it. (Benyamin, Int. 16, M, 28, journalist, a large city in eastern Iran)

External Repression: Misperception About State Repression. Activists always attempted to assess state repression. However, having a precise assessment of state repression was not an easy task for them. When experiencing actual costs or seeing others' experiences, my interviewees found that their assessments were often wrong. A considerable number of my interviewees pointed out their shock when they actually faced state repression. For example, Ehsan, who lived in a small city in northern Iran, and Baran, a women's rights activist who lived in a religious city in the center of Iran:

> The first arrest was very strange. I had almost no idea why I was arrested. (Ehsan, Int. 22, M, 29, formal activist, outside Iran, fled after arrest when sentenced to prison)

> I was really surprised about my first arrest. I never thought it would happen so soon. (Baran, Int. 23, F, 28, outside Iran, fled after arrest when sentenced to prison)

In fact, online activists often misperceive state repression because they do not know what provokes the government, or to what extent the government is capable of tracing them. This remarkable misperception of external repression not only resulted from the inconsistency in government's response to any form of political activism, but also lies in the fact that online activism per se is new, and its consequences are unforeseen. Blogging was the very first use of the Internet for political activism in Iran (Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010). Part of the misperception about the authorities' response to blogging that was mentioned several times during my interviews is because it was new:

> At the beginning of my blog-writing experience, I was not afraid. I thought no one even read my posts, let alone that I would get arrested. (Benyamin)

During interrogation, Sajjad found that evidence for the accusation was all based on his blog posts. It was unexpected for him and made him worried for his friends:

> I mean, from the smallest things in my blog, that up to that day I never thought to be criminal, they extracted things that they said were criminal. [. . .] And I was very worried that those friends who were outside [the prison] and had no idea about this mindset and this situation might write something and get arrested. [. . .] At least [the authorities] brought this fear in my mind that even a simple normal content can be criminal content to them. At the end they sentenced me to eight years in prison. All of the evidence for the charge of disrespecting the leader was from my blog. (Int 26, M, 30, formal activist, a large city in southern Iran)

Misperception is not only about underestimation; it includes overestimation as well, particularly among activists who have not had firsthand experience of repression. Taha, who defined himself as a "cautious person," explained to me that he perceived state repression to be more effective than it actually was. He said,

> Many [of my friends] remain careless and participate with their own name. It makes me really angry, but it is interesting to me and raises my hopes because they were not arrested. It makes me realize that the regime's strength is in fake control; it is mostly creating fear in everyone's heart. (M, 35, informal activist, Tehran)

Internal Repression: Uncertainty/Confusion About Their Own Risk. The abovementioned incongruence between the perception of state repression and actual experience of repression is a source of uncertainty and confusion among activists regarding repression. Taha, after explaining extreme cautions he exercises while uploading photos taken from protesting graffiti, suddenly raised doubt about the necessity of that high level of cautiousness:

> I even know that [my caution] is useless. They don't have that much ability to, for example, find the location of the photos and then go check traffic cameras or identify me by looking into the file property information. But somehow it's an unnecessary obsession.

This uncertainty was also high for online activists who were active anonymously from outside Iran. They never knew whether their identities were disclosed or not:

I am scared to return because there is a high chance that my identity would be revealed. I would not return as long as the circumstances are like this. (Abolfazl, Int5, M, 31, informal/ former student activist, outside Iran)

As the data reveal, perceived repression varies among activists and is melded with misperceptions and ambiguity. Consequently, objective state repression alone cannot be a sufficient predictor of individuals' online political activities.

Three Dimensions of Perceived Repression and Experienced Repression

The interviews also show that the effect of perceived repression and the experience of repression is different, and there is a large discrepancy between the two from the activists' point of view, which is similar to findings from Sullivan and Davenport (2017) that experience of repression differentiates disengaged and committed activists. For most of my interviewees, the experience of repression harmed their personal life, but at the same time it resulted in changing perceived external repression and their consequent decisions about political activism:

[70 days in solitary confinement] somewhat changed my beliefs about the system that we were working in. I didn't become more cautious, but [it changed] my analysis of the situation. . . and I ended up having more faith in what I was doing. [Moreover,] I found out the most important work that could have been done was organizational work [work in the context of a party]; it could be more fruitful. I was more motivated to do organizational work. (Matin, Int. 21, M, 33, journalist, formal activist, fled Iran in 2010)

Regardless of the experience of repression or very high level of perceived repression with extreme fear, my data show the usual response was the continuation of activism. It supports the suggestion of Kurzman (2012) that the prominence of bravery among IGM activists as one of the crucial factors in the Arab uprisings:

The first effect of prison on me was that I became braver than before. I had seen the end; I was past caring. (Danial, Int. 24, M, 36, informal activist, inside Iran)

I used to stay on the street in a strange way so that [if] they came to take me they wouldn't ring the bell or wake anybody up. They were some of my worst days. After that I felt completely empty. The amount of fear was so high that I felt nothing could be worse anyway. I never felt such fear after that. (Benyamin)

What we can take from the data is that three dimensions of perceived repression as well as experienced repression provide a better account of the effect of repression on choices to respond to it.

How Activists Respond to Repression

As my interviewees explained to me, even extreme perception of repression will not necessarily lead to people refraining from political activities. There are considerable numbers who, despite high levels of internal and external perceived repression, chose to resist repression. Taha reported that his activities were always accompanied by extreme fear and cautiousness, but he never stopped it because of threats:

I am doing my best to remain safe, but it has cost me a lot in the last four years. Fear would run through me if anyone rang the door. I would imagine they had come to arrest me . . . This is unnecessary obsession . . . Unfortunately, fear is always there.

[interviewer] Have you ever refrained from your activism because of these fears?

Never. A personal crisis or exhaustion can only stop my online activism"

When activists think retrospectively about their time before prison, they are certain that they would continue in some ways:

I am personally a coward and a conservative person . . . maybe if I knew there was [a possibility of going to] prison, it would have affected my activity. I don't want to say that I wouldn't have been politically active, but maybe I would have been much more cautious. (Danial)

In extreme cases, activists left the country instead of giving up activism. Matin explained to me that for 40 days after the election he stayed in Iran, but like a fugitive, and then he came to the conclusion that he could not continue updating the official website of one of the main parties of the IGM inside Iran, so he fled.

Overall, interviews demonstrated that activists often felt morally obliged to resist repression rather than refrain from online activism. This supports previous findings and theorization that moral obligations help activists to overcome fear under repression (Jasper, 1997; Opp, 1994). They used terms such as "moral duty" and "responsibility": "I felt there was something like a responsibility or duty" (Arya, Int. 20, M, 30, informal activist, a city in northern Iran)

Moral obligation is intensified among activists as a result of both popular street protests during the aftermath of the 2009 elections and the resistance of the IGM leaders who were under house arrest at the time of interviews. What is more, online activists who mobilized others for offline (street) protests feel morally obliged to be committed to the movement. Interviewees, also, referred to instrumental cost-benefit assessments (efficacy). Other factors such as "reflexive" emotions (Jasper, 2011) and social embeddedness were mentioned a few times as drivers to choose to resist repression rather than refrain. For instance, Benyamin said, "I was

so angry that I did not get scared. So I wrote what I wanted in my blog."

Personal constraints, as McAdam (1986, p. 70) defines as the lack of "biographical availability," such as economic issues, family and study commitments, or not having a good job, were found to be the most considerable obstacles to choosing to resist in response to repression.

Strategies

Based on the interviews, I identified at least five distinct strategies that the interviewees/activists adopted to resist repression.

De-identification. A well-known strategy to continue online activities while minimizing risk is to mask one's real identity. This can be done by being active with pseudonyms and a sort of de-identification. Mahan, a prominent campaigner, observed the diffusion of this strategy immediately after the 2009 elections. He considered this proof of people's decision to resist repression instead of ceasing online activities:

> I think repression [. . .] has mostly resulted in the use of pseudonyms which you could see a lot in the first couple of months [after] the election. This was one of the tangible consequences, meaning the activities did not stop. (Int. 11, M, 30, formal activist, outside Iran)

De-identification is applied for the identity of websites as well. The head of an influential campaign revealed how they coped with post-2009 election online repression by becoming active under different names. Yasin, a video maker who voluntarily made dozens of the movement's most popular clips on social media explained likewise as follows:

> Before the election, when there was no risk, I shared the video on my own channel with my name. We felt so secure that everybody came and participated in it without being afraid of showing their faces. But right after the election I closed my channel and started a new one where I uploaded my products using a pseudonym. (Yasin, Int. 13, M, 32, informal activist, outside Iran)

While de-identification is an individual strategy, online activities sometimes take place in groups. Consequently, most of the time, the de-identification strategy was reported by my interviewees together with another strategy, "network reformation," which makes participation in online groups possible.

Network Reformation. Network reformation involves reconsidering the actors' network to manage the risks of activities. For instance, one of my interviewees reformed his personal network as a response to an increase in the level of repression. He explained,

> After a while I decided to work with a network which was not so much in the spotlight. Because after Ashura [the demonstration on the 2009 Shi'a Holy Day that saw an escalation of violence] I had extreme security concerns. I even deleted my Yahoo email account. I used to read cyber security instructions. I was careful about everything. Therefore, I was trying to work with low profile people. We made a small network of people who never had any political record. The best known [in activism terms] was me. We were careful about all security issues in all our weekly meetings. On the Internet, we connected with each other under the presence of a trade group, using codes. (Parsa, Int. 14, M, 27, a big city in eastern Iran)

In the online sphere, network reformation as a complementary strategy with de-identification entails two parts: (1) separation of off- and online activism and (2) trust management. My interviewees introduced *separation of online and offline networks* as an explicit (or sometimes implicit) condition for their group activities:

> I try to have a virtual life. I drew a virtual line around my own identity. My friends who are active along with me do not know my name, my age or my address and details. (Hosein, Int. 6, M, 27, informal activist, Tehran)

Paying attention to the networks is because of the necessity of trust. *Trust management* is one of the tasks that online activists do to avoid the negative consequences of state repression. Ali elaborated how the combination of de-identification and network reformation jointly work as strategies to reduce risk of online political activities in groups:

> When a person has been working with a pseudonym for two to three years and has made an identity, (s)he is somehow trustworthy and one can work and exchange ideas with them. But, it was never meant to take these [online] works in the offline space and there was no need to reveal one's real identity. I had completely separated these things. Meaning, there was no relation between the old space [with previous political and student activists] and the new people who were working online; they were completely separated. I considered this distinction for security reasons. (Int. 8, M, 32, informal activist, outside Iran)

In fact, "anonymity practices" (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015) of online activists involve choosing different options from "real name" to anonymity depending on the worthiness of the network is active in.

Circumvention. One strategy of responding to online repression is using circumvention tools like Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). These circumvention tools are provided by activists and distributed to online networks via different channels. Interviewees also mentioned some other novel and creative forms of circumvention of online repression such as migrating between domains, websites, or platforms, which has also been observed by Yang (2011) in the case of China. IGM online activists also circumvent filtering by hijacking unfiltered platforms:

In the election time, we were active outside and when we were home or in the Internet cafe, we would try to do the same thing but online. We used the little commenting space on a [journalist and satirist]'s website to campaign for Mousavi and Karoubi. Because the website was popular, but not filtered, we used it for publishing the statements, [and] planning demonstrations and slogans. (Hosein)

Self-Censorship (Legitimization by Law or Rules). Another widespread strategy to minimize the risk of political activism among interviewees who work with their own name is identified as legitimization by law. Mahan, a formal activist who left Iran in 2010 after being arrested twice following the 2009 elections, said, "I always do what can be defended in the court of law." Similarly, Reza said about his blog posts that "I thought whatever I write should be defensible in court. (Int 10, M, 35, a large city in central Iran)

Sajjad referred to legal activities: "I tried to enter into any political activity in a way that is, not to say less dangerous, but more legal." Sina (Int. 25, M, 28, formal activist, inside Iran) told me that working within the framework of law and government rules gives him an opportunity to be active. This legitimization by law in practice is reported as a form of self-censorship:

After prison I became more conservative and I was more scared. All the time you think about answering to an interrogator about anything you do. [. . .] I returned to university and continued my activities, but this time, I was thinking about what I was writing so that they couldn't make accusations out of it. (Baran)

I did not leave blogging, but I reduced the attack and intensity of the tone. I self-censored since I learnt the heavy costs of not doing that. (Reza)

Self-censorship in this case is not a form of silence and inactivity, but it is practicing the art of resistance by using words "in order to make a direct point, in an indirect way" (Clothey, Koku, Erkin, & Emat, 2016, p. 865).

Being Inconspicuously Active (Inconspicuous). To manage the risk of activities, many activists pointed to their inconspicuous and covert activities. They often preferred to be involved in covert and inconspicuous activities, such as managing websites, gathering news and information for other activists, and contributing intellectually rather than playing overt and visible roles:

I was sure that I did not want to do public political activities. I wanted to go back to Iran more than [other friends in our group]. [I told them] if I could be of any inconspicuous help, I'd be there for them. (Zahra, Int. 7, F, 31, informal activist)

Kian explained how his work as an editor of a moderate official website was influential while he was as inconspicuous as possible:

Right after the election almost all reformist websites were lost. At that time reformists had no media. I preferred not to [publicly] say something and get arrested . . . instead I focused on managing a moderate website close to reformists. (Int. 15, M, 29, formal activist, inside Iran)

The strategy of being inconspicuously active was mainly adopted by formal activists:

I would try to remain less involved so that I would not get arrested. I would walk on the edge so that I didn't get arrested. I would walk till the threshold of provoking the regime, but I didn't cross it. I would turn to covert activities whenever I felt the regime had been provoked. (Mohammad, Int. 4, M, 36, formal activist, Tehran)

Summary and Discussion of Findings

I can summarize my results in three claims.

First, interviews with IGM activists provide insights into how online activists perceive repression. Despite the general characterization of social media and the Internet as a "safe haven" for challenging authoritarian regimes, the findings underline that online activists under repression always grapple with assessing the risks of their activities on the Internet. Yet, the findings showed widespread misperception, uncertainty, and confusion related to the assessment of risk among activists. The misperception of repression would be found for offline activism too (Kurzman, 1996), but as online activism had been newly added to the repertoire of contention for Iranians, the reaction of the state had yet to have been experienced. As a result, the prediction of the consequences of online activities was difficult for individuals. The data show that overestimations of state repression among IGM activists are as pervasive as underestimations.

Second, three dimensions of perceived repression (importance, external repression, and internal repression) can influence the choice of activists to refrain or to resist. Experienced repression, independently and in interaction with perceived repression, plays a role in this choice.

Finally, this study identified strategies that were adopted by IGM activists to resist severe repression during the aftermath of the 2009 elections. Those who decide to resist repression have a repertoire at their disposal; they can choose between an array of strategies. Some conceal their personal identification to avoid any difficulties and negative consequences. Yet, the problem of trust in cooperation increases by *de-identification*. Actions within a social movement, even in the individualized forms of an online sphere, entail some sort of in-group activities. Combining with the strategy of de-identification, activists acting collectively may consider *network reformation*. Online collective activities with de-identification involve strong consideration of personal/online networks and trust management. Social networking platforms in part help activists in network reformation by

"establishing levels of transparency, privacy, security, and interpersonal trust" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p. 753).

However, as being active with a hidden identity has no prestige and social reward for online activists, some are inclined toward working with their real identity. In this case, they attempt to be active more cautiously and in a legally justifiable manner adopting a *self-censorship* strategy. This is more likely for formal activists who are involved in public and formal politics. These activists can also manage risk by being inconspicuous or doing covert activities, including drafting contents and asking others to publish them online, gathering news, and information and delivering them to trusted others, playing a liaison role to connect people together or bringing them to an online forum. Moreover, almost all activists were involved in different acts of *circumvention* of online repression. This is in line with previous studies that have highlighted the proliferation of using online anonymity-granting technologies in repressive contexts (Jardine, 2018) particularly in Iran (Wojcieszak & Smith, 2014). Interestingly, my data revealed novel sorts of circumventing online repression in addition to using circumventing tools to bypass blocked websites, for example, frequently migrating to different domains, and using unblocked comment fields as a platform for political discussions.

Conclusion

Repression scholars have long been interested in explaining why some people risk their lives and participate in protests under repression while others do not. The aim of this study was to provide answers to this question in the digital era. Recognizing the lack of research on responses to repression and acknowledging the importance of micro-level foundations to understand online activism under repression (Honari, 2018; Linden & Klandermans, 2006; Moss, 2014; Zwerman & Steinhoff, 2005), this study investigated how IGM online activists perceive and respond to online repression.

Presenting seldom-found data gathered by interviewing influential Iranian online activists during times of severe repression-despite the relatively small interviewee sample resulted from the difficulties in interviewing in conflict environments (Cohen & Arieli, 2011) and the problem of representativeness of sample noted in the method section-, this study offers some interesting theoretical and empirical insights for further reflections to both repression studies and social movements and social media studies.

The study has taken significant steps toward enhancing our knowledge on responses to repression of online activism. First, shifting attention from state repression toward activists' agency in response to repression provides an opportunity to better understand political resistance under repression. This approach presents a broader view of activities online activists involved in to organize and sustain "digitally networked" social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). By acknowledging the variety of activities and strategies, future research

could concentrate on motives, mechanisms, and processes by which online activists adopt particular strategies to respond to repression. Future studies would need to delve even deeper into strategies to ascertain who should do what and in which circumstances to resist repression in authoritarian contexts. It would be interesting to assess the outcome of strategies too.

Second, as noted, the perception of risk associated with any activities varies between individuals. By showing the blurred and uncertainty perceptions of repression among online activists, the data support the claim that assessing threats is a complex task (Einwohner & Maher, 2011). The study suggests that three dimensions of perceived repression should be considered: the importance (Ayanian & Tausch, 2016), external assessment of repression, and internal assessment of repression. The findings of this study, indeed, reveal the dissimilarity of the effect of experienced repression resulting from objective repression and socially shaped, subjective, and perceived repression. Further studies need to be carried out to validate the role of factors in altering the effect of perceived repression.

Third, while the literature on social movements and social media in repressive contexts widely accept that online repression deters activism, this article highlights the capability of online grassroots activists to challenge state power in the digital era. This is essential to be considered for future studies in social media surveillance field. This article contributes to the growing body of literature on counter-surveillance tactics (Ataman & Çoban, 2018; Hermida & Hernández-Santaolalla, 2018).

Finally, the two-sided strategic interaction of state repression and activism (Moss, 2014; Ritter & Conrad, 2016) should be acknowledged. This article limits its attention to one side that is strategic response of online activists to state repression. Further research could be conducted to investigate the dynamic of state and activists' strategic responses.

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