



Global Uprising: The Case of #MahsaAmini

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Background

Freedom of assembly and of association are human rights. The rights of individuals to interact and organize themselves, and to collectively express, promote, pursue, and defend common interests are to be protected. However, time and again we hear the news of protesters being killed by police forces without any explanation; and this creates fear among people who want to protest. This case study explores digital global protests, surveillance, and what feminist digital activism means in the current scenario. To do this, the case examines one of the most recent feminist global uprisings that was triggered by the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman in Iran who was killed by Iranian moral police for not wearing hijab properly.

These days, protests are supported by digital media. Even though there has been a rise in digital media use during protests, in the pre-digital era people still protested for their rights, for example the Women's Rights Movements in the 1960s and 70s. Currently, protest movements like #metoo, #Sayhername, and #YesAllWomen have used social media technologies to push global discourse on feminism and female issues. However, the same kinds of digital tools that people use to gather, protest, and raise their voices are also used against them as surveillance. Unfortunately, the violence against women and atrocities continues globally and technologies are used to curb freedom and rights.

In the past decade, with the development of technologies, the world has seen many movements using digital media to protest, share their experiences and anger, and challenge governments;

and in some cases the movements have successfully overthrown historical rulers. The most prominent example of this protest is the Arab Spring protest of 2011, a momentous protest that began in Tunisia but spread to other Arab countries. In Egypt, Twitter was used extensively to communicate, protest, and create the pressure that overthrew President Hosni Mubarak. Simultaneously, digital media has helped support various global protest movements, including #BlackLivesMatter, Occupy Wall Street, and #metoo. While mass protest movements—and surveillance by authorities opposing them—go back to the pre-digital era, the technological advances in policing and other government controls mean that sometimes it is not safe for people to use social media for protest. For example, facial recognition technologies are currently used to identify protesters and put people in jail. Moreover, in Iran, the government has proposed to use facial recognition technologies against women who don't wear hijabs, threatening these women's privacy and freedom. Technologies are also used as a weapon to share disinformation that endangers even the most peaceful protesters—for example, by identifying where people gather via their geo-locations and social media engagement. These issues raise concerns regarding digital repression, human rights, and freedom of expression.

Case Study

On the 16th of September, 2022, the morality police force in Iran arrested and detained Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman from the Iranian Kurdish community, for wearing her hijab “too loosely.” Amini died in detention. The reports of head injuries suggest that she was brutally beaten to death. Her death sparked a series of protests in Iran that demanded accountability for her death and an end to the repression of women's and girls' rights. The demonstrations included songs, memes, and videos posted online (“Hashtags, a Viral Song and Memes Empower Iran's Protesters”, 2022). Amini's death and the ensuing protests in Iran sparked a global outcry and helped mobilize an international women's rights movement to protest her death and demand women's safety, freedom, and rights. With the slogan, Woman, Life, Freedom (*Zan, Zendegī, Āzādī*), thousands of women marched on Iranian streets as well as in other countries, demanding rights for women and protesting state violence. In a press release, UN human rights experts condemned the killings and the crackdown by security forces in Iran, which included alleged arbitrary arrests and detentions, gender-based and sexual violence, excessive use of force, torture, and enforced disappearances. In their press release, they also urged that incident reports be thoroughly and independently investigated, to hold the security forces accountable. However, instead of providing any transparency or restitution, the Iranian government denied the allegations and then further intervened during a protest, killing 537

people. The protest demanded justice for Mahsa Amini's death, and then went further, with the protesters also demanding to overthrow the government which was persecuting and killing them.

Hair for Freedom: A Digital Feminist Movement

Following the death of Amini, a social media campaign called Hair for Freedom was initiated across multiple social media platforms. A woman cutting her hair constituted a strong statement of rebellion. The hair-cutting gesture was adopted worldwide by allied protesters, activists, celebrities, and politicians. Many women across the globe shared their videos of hair-cutting to protest against the killing of Mahasa Amini and demand the freedom of women. In this digital feminist movement, women of many different religions and races showed solidarity in online spaces by cutting their hair off. According to BBC News, "The hashtag #mahsaamini was tweeted and retweeted more than 250 million times in Persian and more than 50 million times in English in the first month after her death." These new ways of fighting for women's rights entering the transnational scope have produced a new understanding of non-Western feminist movements and put forward new topics in and approaches to feminism (*The Guardian*, 2023). In this case, the protesters acted as a "counter-public" against the government's atrocities and against the laws curbing women's freedom. Hair-cutting as a form of protest is not a new thing in the Iranian region: the gesture popularized by Woman, Life, Freedom comes from a nationally renowned Persian epic poem, "Shahameh", where a heroine named Farangis cuts her hair to protest and mourn her husband's murder (*The Guardian*, 2023). The work of activists, protesters, and women across the globe intersects with various power relations, while also reviving and communicating the historical, cultural meaning of cutting hair for social action (Collins, 2019).

Government Interventions

The Iranian government brutally cracked down on the protest. Direct intervention was violent, with hundreds of people killed and thousands arrested in the streets. As the government became aware of the power of technology in the movement, they gradually started to disrupt internet services. On September 22, a few days after the protest erupted in Iran, the Iranian government blocked access to Instagram and WhatsApp along with a national-scale shutdown of mobile networks (Strzyżyńska, 2022). These were the only remaining platforms in Iran, as Twitter and Facebook had already been banned there for several years (Editorial, 2022). The internet shutdown was a direct government response against the power of social media to

gather huge numbers of people to protest. Circumventing the bans and internet sanctions, the protest on social media continued. Videos of women burning their hijabs, women cutting their hair, and other powerful statements continued to circulate.

Some news initially spread indicating that the morality police had been shut down, however on July 16, 2023, a police spokesman said that they would resume detaining and punishing women who did not wear hijab in public according to strict specifications. Before Amini's death, the Iranian government had already planned to use facial recognition technology on public transport systems to identify women who were not wearing hijab. Furthermore, this was not the first time the Iranian government had used technology against people's life and freedom.

Focus Questions

1. Have you come across any of Mahsa Amini's videos, tweets, news, or any kind of information? What did you do after reading, hearing, or seeing information about the protest?
2. In your opinion, what is a digital feminist movement? Why do you think Amini's death sparked the global movement?
3. Digital technologies in Iran's case have been used to protest and also against the protesters. Thus the tools can become a double-edged sword. In this case, what do you think can be done to enhance the capacities of digital technologies to support and protect vulnerable groups who protest?
4. Describe some of the ways that governments use sanctions against the public's privacy and rights. Give some real-world examples where this has happened.
5. What is your opinion on using facial recognition by the Iranian government to identify women who aren't wearing hijabs properly? Do you think this is a violation of women's rights?
6. What do you think of the #HairforFreedom movement? What personal reactions did you have after seeing videos (if you have seen them)?

Thematic Reflection and Discussion

Counterpublics

Michael Warner (2002) defines counterpublics as mass cultural forms and narratives that provide a sense of active belonging to mask or compensate for the real powerlessness of human agents in a capitalist society. The counterpublics in Amini's case can be regarded globally, as they are connected via various networks and exist in a transformative relationship with people who are located in and across networks, thus forming new relationships and engagements that critique exclusions, inequalities, and injustices of the dominant publics (Asen, 2018). In protesting against injustice, activists create counterpublics enclaves, which Karma R. Chávez, a specialist in the uses of rhetorics in activist movements, describes as "sites to invent rhetorical strategies to publicly challenge oppressive rhetoric or to create new imaginaries for the groups and issues they represent and desire to bring into a coalition" (Chávez, 2013).

Discussion Questions

1. How do the concepts of counterpublics and counterpublic enclaves help in understanding how activists, and protesters help create their own space within a patriarchal, autocratic, as well as male-dominated public sphere by forming their own enclaves?
2. How can systemic oppression be challenged such that it creates an equal society?

Intersectionality

Intersectionality works against reductionism and purity, promoting a perspective that accounts for the "differences that make a difference" in how people can maneuver their worlds (Chávez, 2013). The theory of intersectionality, originally articulated by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (2006), became one of the major theories that highlighted social changes and inequalities, directing toward a pathway of social change (Collins, 2019). A well-known scholar and theory-builder in the field of Black Feminisms, Patricia Hill Collins (2019) defines intersectionality as a critical theory that can address contemporary social problems and call attention to social changes that are needed to solve these social problems by providing a foundation for critical questions, concerns, and analyses. Additionally, as "intersectionality aims to explain the social world, and heuristic thinking" (Collins, 2019, p. 24), it can also provide an accessible route to

understand how women with intersectional identities address specific social problems in a global context.

Discussion Questions

1. How does intersectionality help in understanding how women's identities, class, and current positions allow them to advocate and shed light on the inequalities?
2. What is intersectional about the global feminist movement that ensued after Amini's death?

Protest & Digital Technology

Digital technologies help in the creation of networked communities during flashpoint events. They allow large potential coalitions of people to communicate, coordinate distributed work or organizing, and establish networked participation by facilitating the sharing of data, information, and knowledge. Communities formed via digital technologies are helpful in sharing information, collecting data, and working together in organizing. Danah Boyd (2010) defines these kinds of communities as "networked publics"---i.e., the "publics that are restructured by networked technologies and therefore simultaneously are (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice" (p. 39).

Discussion Questions

1. What are the ways people use online technologies to protest and respond to political crises, when at the same time technology can be used against them?
2. How can technologies be used to challenge systemic inequality? Other than Masha Amini's case, can you describe some other cases where technologies have been used to challenge inequality?

Digital Repression

Digital technologies have become an integral part of protesting. It helps to share information, gather, network, and invite more people to join. However, various technologies have become a staple of repressive policing. Digital technologies have been used by governments against protesters to surveil and track their movements, invade their personal privacy, and put them in jail. Steven Feldstein (2021) defines digital repression as "the use of information and

communications technology to surveil, coerce, or manipulate individuals or groups in order to deter specific activities or beliefs that challenge the state.” He includes five different categories of digital repression: surveillance, censorship, social manipulation and disinformation, internet shutdowns, and targeted persecution of online users. In the case of Iran, there were direct repressions, for example internet shutdowns, surveillance, and the use of fake hashtags to confuse the issue.

Discussion Questions

1. As digital repressions continue to happen during protests and in other aspects of human lives, what do you think one can do to challenge it?
2. What examples of global digital repressions have you seen? How have people responded to it? What do you think are the repercussions of such digital repressions in the current digital society?

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