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ONLINE AND OFFLINE INTERACTION IN TERHAN: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Although cyberspace has provided promising new opportunities for online citizens to access and share information and fade the class, gender or ethnical distinction, still these distinction somehow have been remained and offline citizens have been totally forgotten. As a solution, a hybrid interaction between online and offline environments looks essential. This paper analyses limits and challenges of interaction between offline and online citizens, who, by contrast, wish to focus on socio-political affairs. Empirical data collected in Tehran by interviews with cyber activists and ordinary offline citizens show serious social distinction caused by low internet accessibility, low speed and internet knowledge.

Keywords: participation, online and offline, Tehran, interaction, hybrid space

INTRODUCTION

The era of communications and its associated transnational public environments has witnessed the emergence of new cyber social networks which make different people able to interchange information, and images, easily cross borders with a wide measure of flexibility than ever before[i]. This cyber social networks with "its networked, additive, interactive and polycentric form can accommodate radically different types of political praxis from different places at different times, offering a new type of political engagement"[ii] and a new type of social movement. This networks represented through loosely organized and open networks and known as "resistant networks"[iii] are regarded as a defence "…against the placeless logic of the space of flows characterizing social domination"[iv].

Gibson and Ward[v] and in a similar way, Foot and Schneider[vi], count these networks as a place for providing information, campaigning to recruit voters, generating resources, make linkage between supporters and organizations, and promoting participation in political processes[vii] and allowing for an extraordinary opportunity to propel democratic participation[viii] [ix], by this way, these networks act as "a way of revitalizing the open and wide-spread discussions among citizens that feed the roots of democratic society"[x].

Internet is also valuable because it offers organizations "information to glean, expertise on which to draw, coordination never before possible with such little expense, and new challenges to the way that we manage our interpersonal and professional relationships"[xi]. Moreover, Heath[xii] claims "World Wide Web pages are being used to supply information as well as elicit commentary and problem solution advice from stakeholders and stake seekers. The Internet can also serve as a strategic communication instrument which organizations can use throughout a crisis. In addition, Edelman [xiii] pointed out that virtual technology has created a "new generation of crisis response" in a way that risk is not so much inherent in opening up communication about a crisis via the Internet; rather, risk is inherent in the way that the organization responds[xiv].

Although scholars predicted that through the internet, citizens could participate in a direct, deliberative democracy[xv], much of the research has centered on questions of general access[xvi xvii xviii xix xx], content corporatization and commercialization, or universal usage patterns[xxi xxii xxiii xxiv xxv xxvi xxvii xxviii]. Overall, much of the researches have centered on general communicative issues and the possibilities of the internet rather than actual uses and perceptions by those who create online content[xxix].

Theoretical framework

However, the Internet has been imbued with a sense of optimism that it can somehow fade the class, gender or ethnical distinction in its realm and as it is claimed, has reinvented transnational activism [2] and can serve as an important resource for social movement communication, few studies have doubt and remind us somehow in virtual space class, gender, ethnic and religious borders still have been remained similar to the borders do exist in real world[xxx xxxi xxxii xxxiii] and a digital divide can be seen easily in different cases.

Based on these extensive studies and other similar researches, this digital divide occurs in two major sections, the first is originally caused by the disparities in access to and use of digital technology and the second rises from the real world divided which causes the cyber users defines themselves according to dominant class, gender or religion which is more acceptable in the real world. In the first section, some studies revealed that whites, males, the wealthy, college educated, young people and those living in urban communities were more interested to be the users of these new technologies[xxxiv].Indeed, studies continue to show that gender, race, socio-economic status, primary language, geographical location, (dis)ability, educational level and generational characteristics are associated with disparities in access to and use of virtual technology[xxxv 33 31].

Some feminists believe, the internet is 'a space to escape from the dichotomy of gender and the boundaries produced by physical bodies'[xxxvi] and it can be a place where differences and social contexts are erased, creating a true meritocracy or a feminist utopia [xxxvii xxxviii], But this cyber utopia masks opportunities to understand the processes and performances of gender norms undermines feminist efforts to directly address these normative practices, including 'compulsory heterosexuality'[xxxix] or 'the tyranny of gender'[xl]. The second danger is lying in separating a user from her or his site-specific socio-economic location, most users are assumed to represent the dominant (sex, race, class, etc.) – what Nakamura[xli] (1999) calls 'default whiteness'. Users online are assumed white – and are often assumed male, middle-class, technologically savvy, and on US-based sites, Christian[xlii]. In a research on college students, Knox[xliii] found that students

often misrepresent their gender and in online social interactions it is so natural that few seem to give much thought to what usually could be dismissed as a makeover of one's persona. By this definition, the Internet refers to a space where one leaves the body behind without the physical ability; so the body can't become the vehicle expressing changes in beliefs and values anymore. Also, as the cyber utopian ideal of equality are developing, "a wide range of knowledges and cultural belongings are being hidden" [38]. Overall we can conclude, cyberspace excludes all who do not have access, those who do not have the cultural and technical knowledge required to participate and those who do not have the physical ability to participate in the utopian dream [41]. Although through the Internet, people can interact over greater distances in a shorter period and at less expense than in the past, some theorists such as Zuboff[xliv] believed "the Internet reduced face-to face interaction" and created an "uncomfortable isolation" for people at work. Conversely, Raney[xlv] argued that online communication expands social networks and in a study Lawson and Leck[xlvi] proved that "more than half of Internet users reported that email was strengthening their family ties".

An international web survey has suggested that, the use of the internet has increased the frequency of contacts with friends and family in the USA and Japan. By analyzing the relationship between internet use, measured in minutes per week, and the number of contacts with neighbors and friends, Täube[xlvii] found that internet use had a positive correlation with the number of contacts with friends. However, as far as contacts with neighbors were concerned, he indicated that people who do not use the internet have more contacts than internet users. In a survey for the USA, Katz and Rice[xlviii] found despite of some positive aspect, internet use had a negative impact on the number of contacts with neighbors. By using a time-use diary data for the USA, Kestnbaum and colleagues[xlix] show that internet use diminishes the time spent socializing and visiting non-family members. Other studies in Japan, USA and the UK also indicate the existence of a substitution effect of internet use on time spent physically with family and friends[l] [li]. Boase [lii], Wang and Law[liii] showed that face to face contact and physical travel do not decrease due to the ICT-mediated possibilities for maintaining social relationships and they indicate that the popular thesis that ICT use displaces face to face contacts[liv] [50] does not appear to hold true[lv] [lvi]. They resulted and indicated that a large variety of factors influence the communication frequency within social networks. At the level of the social network, relational and geographical distance between the ego and alters are important as well as the communication contents. Relationship between these aspects is dependent on the social composition of the networks and the socio-demographic and other attributes of the ego and alters.

Despite the 'complementarity' finding, the stronger geographical distance decay effect for face to face (compared to electronic) communications indicates that the share of electronic contacts in the total communication frequency increases when distances become larger[54]. At the end, we can summarize the internet can strengthen weak ties happens between strangers especially in closed society, but it would appear that, generally speaking, physical contacts are still considered highly important. In the next step, we will introduce hybrid environments as a solution where both virtual and face to face interaction are able to happen in the same time and take a larger variety of society to interact with each other. In order to offer a solution, first we have to know challenges stand against us, such as social and technical limitations of cyberspace in our case study.

Social and technical limitations of cyberspace in Tehran

Here, we discuss Social and technical limitations of cyberspace and digital divide in Tehran, both in interviews and in questionnaires. By using a comparative research method, we selected two important public spaces in Tehran, one located in an upper class district consisting of the rich and powerful, another located in a lower class district occupied by working poor and the unemployed underclass. For the first one, we have Vanak Square in which often educated and rich people cross and meet each other and Shosh Square is the second one which is a place of mostly poor and uneducated person. Excluding the mentioned differences, these two squares have no major religious or cultural distinct and their disparity restrict to economic and educational ones.

Using data collected among 324 respondents, this article aims at gaining greater insight into (i) cyberspace divide, (ii) the interaction between face to face and virtual communication, (iii) the influence of virtual space on the physical life and at the end, we conclude how a hybrid space is able to create a greater interaction in the society and cause to global justice moreover.

The final sample consisted of 324 participants (135 women and 189 men), whom the 150 participants are from Vanak Square (65 women, 85 men) and the other 174 participants, belong to Shoosh Square (70 women, 104 men). The sample was a mixture of all people who use or cross those two squares during daytime from 10 o'clock last until 22 on all the days of a week. The mean age of the participants is 23 years and ranged from 16 to 58 years.

Questionnaire

After some basic socio-demographic questions (including age, gender, educational attainment, and partner status) first, we examined how much time these two groups (people who cross these two squares) spend on urban spaces and virtual public spaces for socio-political interaction. As we can see in bar chat 1, most of the responders in Vanak spend less than 6 hours per week for social interaction in urban spaces while this number for virtual spaces upsurge more than 10 hours a week. Overall, most of the participants in Vanak prefer to interact in virtual spaces more than physical urban spaces. They indicated several reasons which cause such preference as lack of appropriate public places in Tehran, government monitoring on public spaces and limitations which were imposed by an Islamic traditional society, especially on women. We can summarize that in the absence of appropriate urban spaces in Tehran, educated people who can afford the internet cost, are inclined to use virtual spaces more and more. In the same chart we see that the Shoosh square's participants who are more interested in interacting with each other in public spaces than virtual ones. They prefer to spend their spare time with family, neighbors and friends (people they know) around their neighborhood. Lack of education, low income and social norms limit experiences for those of different race, gender, are the most important reasons they indexed on their questionnaire.

In the second step, we asked them to indicate the period of time they spend on real and virtual spaces and as it is obvious there is a real distinction and border between the times they interact around the clock. But interestingly when group 1 uses virtual spaces (see Figure 1), the group 2 interacts in real public spaces and so in this period of time, a hybrid space can be really useful to connect (offline and online) people which never were able to interact with each other neither in virtual nor in real realm (see Figure 2).

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Then, we asked them to name 10 persons (ranging from close family to stranger) whom they have contact with them during a month and asked them to mark how emotionally close they felt to each person on a 1 to 10 scale (1 not close at all - 10 very close), and how many times they had face-to-face and virtual contact with different persons during a month. By which, we were able to find the relationship between internet use, measured in per month, and the number of contacts with close persons and strangers in two different squares in Tehran. We found people in group 1, which uses virtual space more, have more virtual relationship with strangers and they spend more time with them and the internet use had a positive correlation with the number of contacts with strangers. Also we realized that there is no significant relationship between internet use and close-family connections. However the use of cyber social networks causes a noticeable decrease in the face to face relationship with neighbors (Figure 3). On the other hand, group 2, which belongs to the lower class in their society, is more eager to stick to traditional norms of communication and strong family connection (see Figure 4). They have more powerful connection with co-workers, acquaintances and neighbors which mostly happens by face to face or other previous communication technologies such as phone and cell phone. By comparing these two charts, it demonstrates that weak ties (relationship with stranger) are stronger than group 2 and they are more eager to accept strangers in their lives.

At the end, by interviewing with some online activists (17 people), we clarified that they have a high percentage of minorities (Ethnic and Religious) among all, more than in the general public. Most of them are college graduates with political democratic orientation and somehow all of them are margined by the government, some for their religion or ethnic which differs from acceptable ones and others for their (feminine) gender in a patriarchal society.

DISCUSSION

There is a really serious distinction in using of cyber social networks in different areas of Tehran. Low educated people (approximately consist of poor and old people, women and workers) have the less proportion in virtual realm in comparison with young, rich and educated people. Furthermore, because of stern distinction both in the society and in virtual space, these two groups (which mentioned above), have no acceptable chance to interact with each other. They have used different public spaces in different hours and group 2 has no great opportunity to access to virtual spaces. So, we introduce a hybrid space (both real and virtual) which is able to entail a greater part of the society, while offline people spend their time on public space; they are able to interact with online citizens and share their interests and beliefs in a similar way that online users do. Internet provides users with a wide range of communications with strangers which known as weak ties is very important and provides us with important information about ideas, threats and opportunities in time to respond to them. Moreover, “Societies and social systems that have more weak ties are more likely to be dynamic and innovative. If the system is mostly made up of strong ties, then it will be fragmented and uncoordinated [lvii lviii lix].

As a number of studies indicate that poor people rely more on strong ties than do others[lx lxi], our case studies also confirmed that group 2, are more eager to stick to strong family ties. In the other words, strong ties seem to be linked both to economic insecurity and a lack of social services. As Granovetter [57] suggested that the heavy concentration of social energy in strong ties has the impact of fragmenting communities of the poor into encapsulated networks with poor

connections between these units; individuals so encapsulated may then lose some of the advantages associated with the outreach of weak ties. This may be one more reason why poverty is self-perpetuating.

Offering a hybrid space as a space connecting offline citizens to virtual society can help poor people expand their weak ties in society due to solicit help from people having desirable resources: wealth, status, prestige, power or access to others[lxii] [lxiii] and guide us to global justice. On the other side, upper class people are more relaxed about weak ties and so tend to have more. However, they have to resort to expensive clubs and other filtering mechanisms to find 'people like them' with whom they can build stronger ties.

This hybrid space is a way for online users to go toward reality, and for offline citizens close to a desired utopia. It's a" heterotopia" [lxiv]a sort of mixed, joint experience and it consists of a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live.

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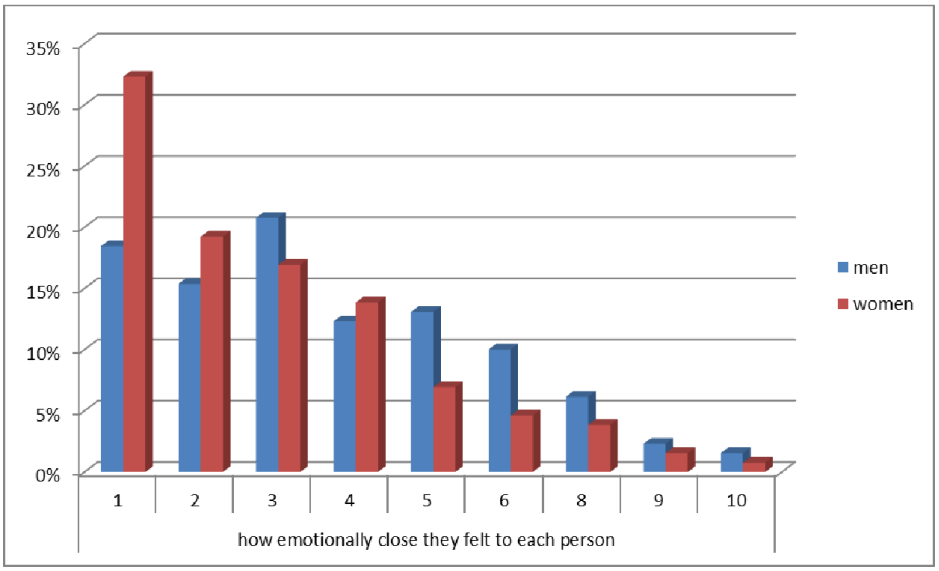
We studies digital and physical divide in two major squares in Tehran> We prove digital – physical divide and it's challenges in Tehran> We introduce hybrid spaces in order to fade digital and physical divide.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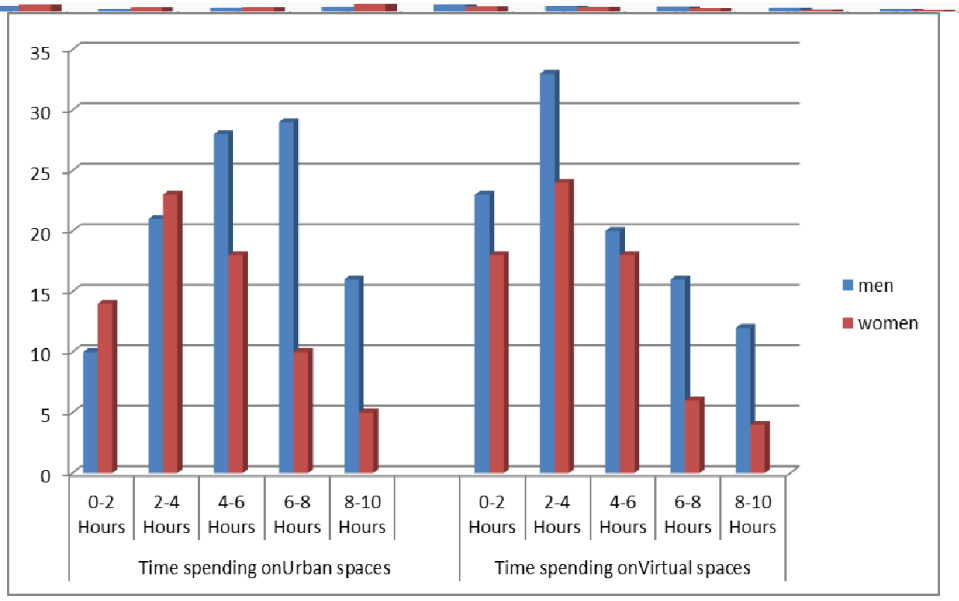
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