

## The State's Disinformation Campaigns and the Young Iranian Dissidents' Participatory Media Literacy

<http://dx.doi.org/10.25008/jkiski.v9i2.1066>

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**Submitted:** December 20, 2023, **Revised:** February 26, 2024, **Accepted:** May 30, 2024

Accredited by Kemdikbudristek No. 152/E/KPT/2023

**Abstract** - State media plays a central role in empowering the authoritarian regimes to subjugate their people. In Iran, this undemocratic practice largely takes place in the form of information manipulation where the state-run national media generate deceptive messages to sway the masses and influence the public opinion. Yet, the rapid advancements of communication technologies in the past two decades have gradually shaken this power structure in a variety of ways, among them enabling a form of participatory media literacy (PML) among dissident youth. Characterized by virtual social networking, PML has progressively grown from the youth's online activism and political engagement, especially during the periods of social unrest. Intersecting 'participatory culture', this form of media literacy emanates from a rather organic and spontaneous progression in knowledge and experience acquisition which distinguishes it from the conventional learning of the subject in the educational institutes, both in terms of the scope limitation as well as the learners' deliberation. Typically, the process involves the members' active participation (content sharing, discussions and critical evaluation of the presumably disinformation cases) in social media and other oppositional online communities. Taking Telegram as a popular social networking platform for the young activists' PML, this study uses netnography to examine the contents of some of the subversive Telegram channels (STCs), providing examples of the disinformation cases discussed/evaluated by the members. Ultimately, it is argued that in authoritarian nations, PML offers opportunities for nullifying the state's disinformation campaigns and their preventive effects on the progress of social movements and political change.

**Keywords:** participatory media literacy; Iranian youth; disinformation; activism; Telegram

### Introduction

Since its inception in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) has consistently subjected its own people to manipulation of information in a variety of ways. Throughout these years, the legacy media of the state, including the press and the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), have functioned as a powerful means of propaganda and mass disinformation (Hassaniyan, 2022; Semati, 2023). Initially, these media institutions, together with the conformist journalists, began to organize and disseminate a barrage of unverified reports to galvanize anti-Pahlavi sentiments as a way to validate the new theocratic establishment (Blout, 2023). The state's propaganda machine continued to run with even more intensity during the eight years of Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), though it shifted its focus from Pahlavi to Iraq, USA, Israel, and several other nations whom they called 'enemy' (Matin, 2023). Meanwhile, the chief wartime hype and agitprop aimed to portray Iran as the victim of the western

imperialism, and to indoctrinate the masses with Shia/Revolutionary ideologies to make ultimate sacrifice in a bid to save the Islamic regime (Rad, 2022).

Throughout the post-war era, however, the overbearing mass communication policies of the state did not seem to ease off, and furthermore faced new complexities and challenges, namely, the arrival of new media in late 1990s. In particular, during this period Internet and Satellite TV were celebrated as the harbingers of the up-and-coming alternative media as they stepped in to emancipate the people of Iran from the state's information monopoly (Sohrabi, 2021). It was alongside these developments that the country's traditionalist-modernist divide gave rise to Iranian youth's identity politics, spearheaded by the liberal nonconformist young generation who frequently exhibited their defiance against the government's authoritarian rule (Matin, 2022).

The intersection of technological advancement and social dynamics, particularly in the context of the recent youth-led uprisings in Iran, therefore, prompts questions about the various implications of the young activists' experiences amidst an environment characterized by media saturation, information discrepancy and mounting dissent. Hence, the present study posits that the digital interactions of contemporary young activists have engendered a novel concept termed 'participatory media literacy' (PML). Within the framework delineated in this research, PML refers to the growing abilities of networking members to access and analyze news media, create, reflect on and act towards political objectives. From theoretical perspective, PML draws on participatory literacy defined by Boyd (2010) as "consuming to understand, producing to be relevant", and the notion of 'prosumers' introduced by Jenkins et al. (2006), whose idea of participatory culture underlined the individuals' contribution to the online culture production.

To better understand the nature of PML, however, it is helpful to consider the youth's media use and political engagement in the course of the past two decades or so. In terms of media use, as the new millennium opened, the Iranian youth made a name for themselves as one of the most active Internet users in the Middle East (Wulf et al., 2022), while frequently reasserting their preference for the satellite TV over IRIB (Matin, 2021; Dal & Nisbet, 2022). At the same time, and in tandem with a growing unrest across the nation, the younger generation's modest request for a reformation gradually turned into a demand for regime change (Sydiq, 2022; Khatam, 2023). Although this shift in the youth's political stance, which took place alongside the relentless media contention in Iran, stretches over the years, the early indications of PML only transpired in 2009 and during the Green Movement (Shahi & Abdoh-Tabrizi, 2020). In fact, it was this nationwide youth-led movement that for the first time signalled the unprecedented role of social media in informing and mobilizing the masses against the government's political agendas and disinformation campaigns (Kermani, 2023).

Years later, the expansion of the social media and the youth's growing political activities in cyberspace marked another milestone in PML throughout another ongoing movement known as 'Woman, Life, Freedom' (Abou Karam, 2023). Sparked by Mahsa Amini's killing by Iran's morality police in September 2022, this movement has become a global symbol for freedom-seeking Iranians, posing a threat to the authoritarian regime (Çalhan, 2023). Following this timeline, the present study aims to provide empirical evidence of PML and underscore the critical role of this emerging phenomenon in raising public awareness of the state's disinformation campaigns. In doing so, it examines the activities within certain subversive Telegram channels (STCs), with a particular focus on the members' critical posts that entail gathering credible information and making logical judgments on each disinformation case.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Prospects of informal media literacy*

Media literacy, despite its long history, emerged as a distinct category following the explosion in image-based media during the past few decades. It is broadly referred to as "any learning opportunity that increases an individual's understanding of how the mass media function" (Ott & Mack, 2020, p. 342). Lee and So (2014) identified diversity in defining media literacy across nations and institutions, emphasizing critical interaction with media messages and the skills to access, understand, analyse, use, and generate media content. Media literacy involves understanding the nature of media, their functions, the conveyed messages, societal roles, and audience responses (Hanson, 2021).

The rise of new media necessitated new media literacies, comprising essential competencies and social skills for navigating the modern media environment, especially vital for younger generations.

These literacies, fostering collaboration and networking, complement traditional skills with research, technical, and critical-analysis capabilities usually gained in educational settings (Potter, 2021). The integration of media literacy into education systems progressed notably in First World nations at the turn of the 21st century, contrasting with the slower uptake in many Global South countries (Fedorov & Levitskaya, 2018). Initiatives included the introduction of mandatory media education courses in mainstream school curricula in Europe, Australia, and North America (Stix & Jolls, 2020).

In underdeveloped nations where formal media literacy education is lacking (Osman & van der Walt, 2022), there's a noticeable shift towards informal learning outside the classroom. This informal learning is driven by widespread internet access and social media usage, even among economically disadvantaged groups (Syam & Nurrahmi, 2020). While lacking formal validation, this self-directed education offers promise in enhancing youth media literacy through various means. Activities like social networking and online usage have shown to enhance language skills (Alakrash et al., 2021) and technological abilities (Pires et al., 2022), crucial components of media literacy. The youth today seem adept at setting goals, pursuing opportunities, and managing their learning environments, largely due to the pervasive presence of ICT tools in their education and daily lives.

### *PML and participatory culture*

Parallel to the idea of informal learning, is the participatory literacy which according to Dudeney et al. is “the ability to contribute to the collective intelligence of digital networks, and to leverage the collective intelligence of those networks in the service of personal and/or collective goals” (2014, p. 31). In the same way, PML can be defined as having the necessary skills for both producing and using digital content, and being able to interpret and interact with documents and artefacts from a range of cultural contexts, in order to benefit oneself and/or others.

Intersecting and coalesced with PML, however, is the concept of participatory culture. As put by Jenkins et al. (2006), participatory culture has “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices” (p. xi). They point to affiliations, expressions, collaborative problem-solving, and circulations as four types of participatory culture that require “new literacies...[that] involve social skills developed through collaboration and networking” (p. xiii). Participatory culture offers advantages such as peer-to-peer learning, altered views on intellectual property, diverse cultural expression, valuable work skills, and an empowered citizenship perspective (Jenkins et al., 2006). This culture acts as an invisible curriculum shaping youth experiences that they carry into educational and professional environments.

Nevertheless, the new skills necessary for media literacy encompass conditions and activities including play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, discernment, transmedia navigation, networking, and negotiation (Jenkins et al., 2006). In many ways, such prerequisites for media literacy are acquired through a natural process of learning inherent to participatory culture. PML, thus, has come to mean the purposeful/spontaneous learning and understanding of how the mass media function, through sharing knowledge with others in an interest group.

### *Possibilities of media literacy in Iran*

Iran's approach to media literacy diverges from that of its Middle Eastern counterparts as the Education and Culture Ministries have yet to think of incorporating it into public education systems, even as the 21st century progresses. This lapse is linked by Alavipour et al. (2020) to institutional challenges and a lack of consensus on the definition of media literacy. Currently, media literacy is primarily taught at the university level in a limited capacity (Azizi et al., 2021), limiting its development due to its interdisciplinary nature. Such limitations are the consequences of the authoritarian interventionism on research and scholarly activities in this field, as well as hinderances of “Islamic precepts, security issues, regional political instability, and tight control over the population” (Rivetti & Saeidi, 2018, p. 35).

In Iran, the media literacy landscape is influenced by factors like the urban-rural digital gap (Nasri et al., 2020) and generational differences (Matin, 2022). Urban youth stand out for their tech-savviness, social media usage, and involvement in civic and political activities (Bajoghli, 2019), showing a keen interest in evaluating social and political issues, especially online (Tajmazinani, 2020). Amidst the

increasing media and press control, censorship as well as lack of independent journalism, access to reliable information have become vital, particularly for the nonconformist Iranians (Wojcieszak et al., 2019). As a result, the social media users and networking communities have become essential in reporting social and political issues in the digital public sphere (Bebawi, 2017). In this way, the Internet at large has provided a relatively safe platform for Iranian youth to express dissent and critique to the government in recent decades (Kamrava, 2022). Moreover, the dichotomy between state broadcasting and alternative media has cultivated critical news literacy among youth, fostering a process of questioning, evaluating, and responding to diverse information sources. This type of unpremeditated media literacy involves active engagement in analysing and sharing content, promoting social connections and political objectives.

Indeed, the engagement of individuals in subversive and activist social networking groups, fuelled by their emerging IT skills and political interest, is seen to enhance the collective media literacy and democratic participation over time (Rahbarqazi & Baghban, 2019). Studies also suggest a reciprocal relationship between media literacy and youth political engagement (Lee et al., 2022). This interaction is reinforced by critical communication skills, user-generated content, and active participation facilitated by modern media technologies (Tugtekin and Koc, 2020).

#### *STCs as a dynamic site for PML*

Alongside well-established news broadcasters like BBC Persian and VOA Farsi, alternative media platforms such as Telegram groups have emerged as vital sources for socio-political news dissemination in Iran (Al-Rawi, 2022). Telegram, with over 50 million users in Iran, stands out as a popular choice, especially among young adults aged 18-35, offering secure communication channels and file-sharing capabilities crucial for social mobilization (Kermani, 2020). These groups play a significant role in recent social and political events by providing a safe space for communication and coordination, effectively shielding members from potential persecution and surveillance (Chegeni et al., 2022).

Above all, STCs (and other anti-regime online communications platforms for that matter) have indubitably played a prominent role in the survival of independent journalism by creating a space for the uncensored reporting of the netizen, and an opportunity for the activists to engage in online social and political discussions (Ranji, 2023). As they gradually grew into a hub for the nonconformist youth, STCs continue to be unambiguous about their ultimate objective that is to step up the process of regime change and to bring about freedom and democracy in Iran. This ambitious project, however, proceeds largely in a serious manner under the regulations set by the admins, even though at times the members' activities take on a humorous or artistic tone, such as sharing caricatures, creatively edited photos and other forms of sarcastic expressions. By looking at the process of creating/sharing contents as well as shaping new ideas and acquiring knowledge, what invariably transpires the most, is the collective hands-on form of learning about the news media's function and critically analysing their messages, conceptualized in this study as PML.

#### **Material and Methodology**

This study adopts a virtual ethnography approach to examine subversive cyber culture in a number of STCs in order to capture insightful information about PML found in these online anti-regime communities. Also known as netnography, this method involves observing naturally occurring discussions and phenomena in social media and other community-based cyberspace to uncover their members' cultural codes, trends and practices (Kozinets, 2019). Given that prolonged observation and immersive participation in online communities are some of the key prerequisites of netnography (Bowler, 2010), the author of this paper joined four STCs for a period of five months, making continual observation of the members' content sharing, interactions and discussions. This timespan was purposefully chosen because it ran parallel to the initial stage of the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising in Iran, a period characterized by an upsurge in both the state media's disinformation campaigns and the young dissidents' exposing countermoves.

#### *Selection of the STCs*

The netnographic fieldwork, as Kozinets (2010, p. 89) suggested, should have the following characteristics: a) relevant; relate to the research focus/question(s), b) active; have ongoing communications, c) interactive; have a flow of communications between participants, d) substantial; have a critical mass of communicators and an energetic feel, e) heterogeneous; have a number of different participants, and f) data-rich; offer more detailed or descriptive rich data.

In conducting this study, four STCs that more or less met the above-mentioned criteria were selected as the research site (Table 1.), namely, آزادی (t.me/sepehrazadi), ملی گرایان مردم گرا (t.me/Mellig), رادیو شمرون وی آی پی (t.me/radioshemroonvip), and گپی آزاد (t.me/gapyazad).

With close to half a million subscribers in total, these STCs have grown in popularity among young dissidents and this can be easily detected by a cursory glance at of the overall communication styles as well as the vernacular and linguistic terminologies used by the participating members. These channels' remarkable association with youth is also reflected in the ways the admins address the members, through frequently pointing to Gen Z (born 1997-2012) as the agents of regime change in Iran, and admiring their defiance as an exclusive quality of this generation. In this regard, some of the aforementioned STCs have even stated their objectives in 'About' section of the channels as: to bring together likeminded dissidents, subverting the Islamic regime and advocating a secularist democratic ruling system in Iran.

Among other important reasons for choosing these STCs over several others, was the admins' effective and round-the-clock handling of the members' activities as well as their commitment to the goals and regulations of the channels. Some of these regulations, for example, require the members to avoid sending irrelevant, baseless or offensive contents, although the degree of the allowed indecency or levity may vary depending on the channel.

Nevertheless, what is generally prioritized by these STCs are first-hand accounts or critical updates of the political news from all over the world that, in one way or another, challenge the theocratic regime in Iran.

On the other hand, these channels do not hold with discussions around issues, including those that undermine Iran's territorial integrity, support infamous groups such as the People's Mojahedin, or promote reconciliation with the IRI's Reformist party whose underhand actions repeatedly thwarted the previous protests in Iran. Taken as a whole, however, the single most important issue that consistently stands out as the primary concern of the admins (and subsequently the members), is the credibility and accuracy of the shared information in their channels.

### *Contents of the STCs*

The selected STCs for this study contain an enormous amount of cumulative data in the form of posts such as text messages as well as shared document, photo, video, and audio files. Generally, these posts are pieces of information about a wide range of social, cultural, and political subjects that are pertinent to the current conditions in Iran, often aligned with the goals of the channels.

In this research, however, rather than going through the posts in their entirety, only the relevant ones were considered for investigation, precisely because the focus of netnography should be on a single phenomenon or concept (Kozinets, 2010, p. 81). Accordingly, given that the study sought to find evidence for PML among the members, the key selection criteria for these posts was having some

**Table 1.** Some features of the selected STCs

Channels	Link Address	Subscribers	Shared Videos/Phot
آزادی	(t.me/sepehrazadi)	306,375	98,013
ملی گرایان مردم گرا	(t.me/Mellig)	130,753	61,854
رادیو شمرون	(t.me/radioshemroonvip)	28,746	43,038
گپی آزاد	(t.me/gapyazad)	3,308	58,132
	<b>Total</b>	<b>469,182</b>	<b>261,037</b>

informational/analytical value about the state media disinformation cases. Hence, in terms of contributory activities, the members' participation largely took place in following ways: (1) posting explanatory information obtained from external sources (e.g. forwarded links or cut and pasted from online news bulletins); (2) posting comments that reflected a member's personal analysis or judgment about the matter in hand; (3) posting revealing first-hand information (e.g. photo snaps or video recordings that show live events).

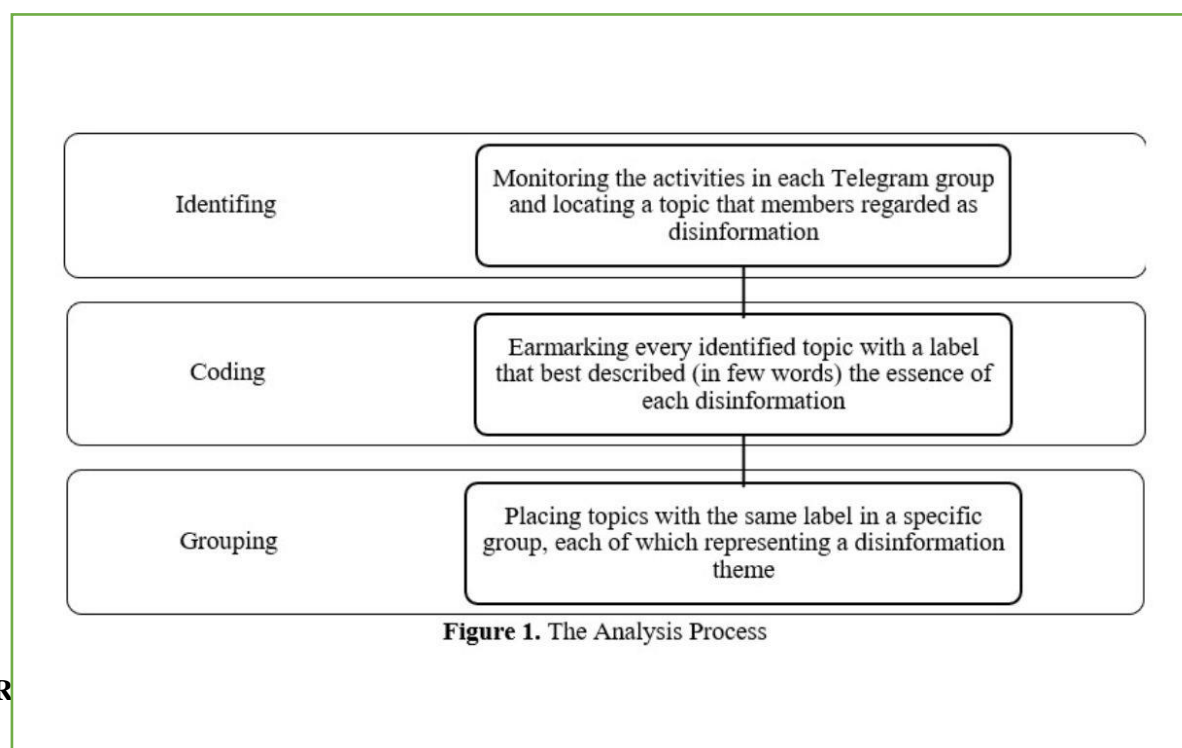
#### *Procedure and analysis*

The postings in the selected STCs were monitored during a five-month period (16 September-16 February), leading to the identification of 58 disinformation cases around which the members reflected their critical views and shared relevant contents in order to expose them.

What qualified each of these 58 cases as 'disinformation' and prompted their selections for the analysis were: (1) being a piece of information that was either officially reported by the state media (e.g. IRIB, the national press and their subsidiaries), or circulated in the Internet by unknown sources suspicious of being part of Iranian Cyber Army (hackers hired by the government for planning/executing cyberattacks and disinformation projects), and (2) having drawn substantial attention in the groups, in the form of the members' postings, such as analytical comments, follow-ups, analyses from other sources and so on, discussing or interrogating the concerning case.

Here, it is worth stressing that it was not the study's aim to prove these cases as 'disinformation', but rather it strived to find evidences of PML in the under-investigation groups. Therefore, while it was important for the researcher to dwell on the members' activities (content-sharing, interactions and discussions) about each topic, he had to pay specific attention to the basic line of reasoning (evidence → logic → conclusion) in their arguments. Inevitably though, there were instances when certain arguments seemed to deviate from this path. Even so, such issues were quickly addressed either by the corresponding admins, or by other more experienced members with greater depth of knowledge in the subject and those who were more adept at identifying disinformation cases.

Nevertheless, the analysis process (Figure 1.) began by identifying disinformation cases which were taken as the dataset. Next, these cases were coded accordingly by "aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information [...] and then assigning a label to the code" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 259). At this point, each label was simply a title that described a particular information manipulation strategy assumed to be formulated by the state (unit of analysis). Lastly, after combining the similar categories in bigger groups, a total of 8 themes emerged which are presented next, in the 'Results' section.



### *Presenting archived videos as live*

One of the state's frequently used strategies for projecting a popular image of itself to the world has been the organization of the rallies and mass gatherings on specific anniversaries or occasions. Indeed, drawing big crowds to these events while giving a lot of media coverage remain at the top of the regime's agenda, and have so far been instrumental in influencing the public opinion and convincing the international observers of its legitimacy. Nevertheless, with the growing public's dissatisfaction with the government in the past decade, the grassroots' participation in such symbolic activities, particularly since 2017 when Hassan Rouhani could not fulfil his promises after his first term of Presidency, has gradually diminished.

This set off the alarm for the Islamic regime to work out a new plan for at least maintaining its image as the people's government. In order to address the shrinking crowd dilemma, however, national television frequently used the technique of juxtaposing the live feeds with selected archived videos. To do so, the broadcast of the live feeds of a reporter, as he/she stands in a medium shot in front of a relatively small group of people, were put side by side with arial long shots carefully chosen from archives, showing much larger pro-regime gatherings, clearly from the previous years when the government had apparently the majority's support.

Although, for an untrained eye, the both screens seemed to be a live broadcast of the same event taken from different angles, the members made their own arguments while some of them provided a number of analyses done elsewhere by some skilful individuals. For instance, some members shared contents showing screenshots of the TV which highlighted certain elements, like the warm clothes worn by the people in the first image as opposed to the relatively lighter attires of the overall crowd in the second image; or after zooming in on the placards carried by the marchers in the arial shot it became clear that the mottos were irrelevant to the event being shown on TV. In a similar manner it was revealed that the state television was just pretending to show two separate live reports of the pro-regime demonstrations taking place in different locations. Here, after certain examinations by some audiences who happened to live at the same whereabouts, it was revealed that the state television was showing the exact same location, albeit from different angles.

### *Forced confessions*

The Bloody November (Aban-e Khoonin) in 2019 was a new wave of nationwide civil protests ignited by a dramatic increase of fuel price in Iran. During these protests more than 1500 civilians were killed, including at least 17 teenagers and about 400 women. In order to give the unrest a lower profile, the government agents stole the bodies of the dead protesters from morgues, and arrested the injured from hospitals. Furthermore, those who lost their relatives or somehow suffered from these brutal crackdowns and wanted to go public were arrested, threatened or silenced. In line with these repressive efforts, the state media often aired interviews in which relatives of the victims claimed that their family members had not been killed by Iranian authorities during protests but rather had died of accidental, unrelated causes. These suppressive violations which is only a small fraction of a vicious practice called 'forced confession', not only continues to this day, but also has tremendously intensified since the latest 2022 nationwide uprisings. In this way, the Islamic regime's systemic reliance on forced confessions as just another disinformation technique points to the authorities' denial to take responsibility for the killings and illustrates their refusal to speak truth to its citizens and the international community.

Expectedly, each of these forced confessions sparked a wave of responses in the said STCs, as members tried to share their views/analyses or convey other people's. One of many forced interviews was the one that the state television conducted with the mother of a ten-year-old boy, Kian Pirfalak, few days after her son was shot by security forces as he was travelling with family in his father's car. In this short video she was shown denying her fiery speech at Kian's funeral and her Instagram posts in which she criticized the government and held the Supreme Leader responsible for his son's death: "Please don't misinterpret my remarks ... My child was martyred ... I didn't recite anything ... Don't use my son's death for your own ends," she said. However, in analysing the authenticity of this interview, the members retrieved the video of her speech at her son's funeral as well as her Instagram posts, and thoroughly compared them with the one said on TV. They also pointed to tone of speech, body language and also the red coat worn by her in the interview all of which contradicted to be a sign of mourning mother; rather, they thought of these elements as enough evidence to regard the interview an obvious form of confession made under duress.

### *Out of context shots*

One of the long-standing disinformation methods which particularly in recent years have become a commonplace in national media is to purposefully single out one or a few shots of a scene and then presenting them in a completely different context. In this way, the selected shots (usually a segment of a news report, documentary or even a video clip in social media), become a readily available vehicle for carrying alternative meanings than they were initially intended for. The created footage, then, makes it possible for the production team involved in this kind of content forgery to convey a falsified message to the audience. One of these, was a four-minute documentary about Ali Karimi a famous dissident football player which was made and aired on national TV after he left Iran and sought political asylum in Canada. As also discussed by the members in the concerning STCs, this documentary consisted of a series of very short back-to-back video clips of brief incidents about Karimi, selectively chosen from available video recordings of his career. Each piece used in this montage presented a negative act or utterance of this footballer in isolation when taken out from its actual context (e.g. arguing with referee, shouting at or pushing someone in the field, or using bitter words in an interview). Surprisingly, these were moments of Karimi's life and career that were previously praised by the national media pundits as the signs of his success, bravery and heroism.

### *Distorted dubbing*

This type of disinformation technique involves the selection of a footage from foreign sources and dubbing them in Farsi using contrived translation, turning it into a piece of information with some kind of political significance. Distorted dubbing, being frequently used across various content productions of the national media, takes advantage of the older, less-educated segment of the population in Iran who are generally disinterested in foreign contents and have inadequate fluency in languages other than their own mother tongue. One remarkable case in which the members particularly expressed their resentment of the reckless amount of the information manipulation by the state media was about Cristiano Ronaldo.

In a news report on the national TV a scene was shown where Iceland captain Aron Gunnarsson asks Ronaldo for his shirt at the end of a European football match. This video shows that Ronaldo refused to exchange his shirt with him. The Farsi voiceover, however, misleadingly introduces the captain of the Iceland national team as the Israeli national team player and says "the shirt that was not given to the murderer"! In another part of this report, a video of Ronaldo was played, dubbed in Farsi, saying, "The Israeli fans are the most hated fans for me. I can't stand them. I will not trade my shirt with a murderer." Meanwhile, with a simple search on YouTube, it turns out that this video is a message from Ronaldo to Syrian children, in which there is no mention of Israel. Ronaldo says in the original video that "this message is for the children of Syria. We know that you have suffered a lot. I am a famous football player, but the real heroes are you. Do not lose hope. The world is with you. I'm with you."

### *Performers as random citizens*

Perhaps the most prevailing trend of disinformation within the framework of the national TV is the practice of portraying the performers or hired individuals as ordinary and random citizens. This is where the national TV reporters are shown in public places interviewing performers or paid individuals who pretend to be ordinary random citizens. In conducting these scripted interviews, a public setting is chosen where hustle and bustle of a city street can be easily seen and heard. Then, after giving a brief introduction of the location and purpose of the interview, the reporter acts as if he or she is trying to stop a passer-by or ask an onlooker in an event to tell something or answer some questions. In recent years, however, there have been additional improvements to make these scenarios more believable. For instance, following the growing suspicion of the majority nonconformist public who questioned the authenticity of such interviews (e.g., the use of 'leading' questions and biasedness in selecting interviewees), the national TV began to show interviews with those who were seemingly chosen from less conformist groups (e.g., not having strict hijab/Islamic dress code, and talking with deceptively apathetic tone of speech). Even so, no matter how hard the national TV tries to convince the general audiences about the authenticity of these interviews, the members in the Telegram groups, almost by default, consider them one of the most obvious and trivial types of disinformation.



### *Reconstructing the scene differently*

With the state's increasing oppression, every now and then, videos have been circulating in the Internet and social media which would illustrate the extent of the brutality of the regime's official or unofficial forces against innocent people. Often informed by the eyewitnesses or the accounts of the physical evidence provided by the victims, the circulation of these reports in cyberspace created immense and fiery responses from a broad spectrum of the society who condemned the regime's callousness and irresponsibility. Therefore, in order to avoid risking its reputation as a so-called 'the peoples' government', the state media began to recreate the crime scenes which told different scenarios so that they could prove the enraged public otherwise. In one of these incidents, Gohar Eshghi, the elderly mother of a dissident blogger who died in custody, was assaulted by unknown individuals when she was on her way to visit her son's grave on 10th of September, 2021. To change the story, the national TV aired a footage allegedly taken from a CCTV showing the moment of an accident in which a woman was hit by a motorcycle, claiming that the victim was Gohar Eshghi. In debunking the state media's footage, after some investigations, many people had pointed to a number of issues, such as the lack of CCTVs in that area, the woman's unequal stature and posture and walking pace, and more importantly, the actual injuries of the victim which was documented earlier by her did not seem to match the way the staged accident was played out.

### *Intentional leaking of secret information*

More recently, and particularly during the 2022 uprisings, there have been an explosion in the spread of voice recordings that appeared to be leaked from the Iranian officials' top-secret meetings or their private conversations. Although for many, these voice recordings seem to be genuine, others who are more critical and follow the political affairs closely claim that these are just another disinformation technique designed by some pro-regime quarters or the Iranian intelligent agency as part of their agenda to calm down the turbulent situation in Iran. As such, those who are more sceptic argue that it is too simplistic to disregard the frequency and effortlessness of the leak and release of such classified information; specially at those points at time when confusing and distracting the public from their subversive activities can buy time for the government's think tanks to devise new plans for responding to the imminent social unrests.

### *Faking celebrities' social media accounts*

There is little doubt in the crucial role of the celebrities in shaping the public opinion, and this has long triggered the Iranian authorities' need for exploiting these individuals' fame and popularity. The rise of the social media in the past two decades which has led to an unprecedented level of celebrity-public connection, has also entailed increasing vulnerabilities for both the celebrities and their fans and followers. On the one hand, the Islamic regime's mounting pressure on Iranian celebrities to turn them into the government's voice, has left them with little choice: cooperating with the government or standing with the people and suffering the consequences. On the other hand, the public members are prone to deception, as the information shared by the celebrities can be either under duress or even come from unknown sources that pretend to be them. This latter form of distortion has particularly become a commonplace of digital world, as the regime's cyber army has a long history in creating fake social media accounts associated with nonconformist celebrities, and actively posting made-up messages to defame these individuals or mislead their supporters. In sorting out this, various measures are taken by social media users, the most important of which are the number of the followers of each account, as well as the substantiality, consistency and relevancy of their contents.

## **Conclusions**

This study attempted to uncover evidence of PML, proposing that, as an emerging phenomenon, this form of tacit knowledge acquisition has over time equipped young dissidents with fundamental tools to transcend the state's propaganda machinery and its disinformation campaigns. It began by inferring that the development of such phenomenon stemmed from the country's contemporary mediascape, political climate, and the everyday living circumstances of the youth who are best described as a distinct defiant and non-conformist generation in Iran. In particular, these conditions foreground the idea that the youth's access to reliable information, creating contents and sharing them

with likeminded peers in a number of dissenting virtual groups has been a prerequisite to their quest for liberalism and political change. While this form of engagement in online activism seems inevitable in the context where free press and independent journalism do not exist (Sreberny & Khiabany, 2023), what seems to propel the youth's PML has been the state/alternative media dichotomy and their conflicting contents.

Although such inconsistencies of information naturally have an initial tendency to cause confusion among their audiences, what looks obvious in hindsight, is otherwise. Under the circumstance of the general public's distrust to the Islamic Republic's main stream news, and their more and more reliance on alternative media for acquiring the needed information, there has been a gradual growth in the youth's ability to evaluate the reliability of the news. Being relatively more IT savvy than their predecessors, and having a stronger desire for change than any other social groups, Iranian youth's quest for reliable information begins with sifting through certain alternative news sources on the Internet and across myriad satellite TV channels. In order to make their assessments, then, they have to engage in other activities, such as testing and finding out about reliability of these news sources and juxtaposing their information against the corresponding ones within the Iranian mainstream media. In this way, the youth's continuous assessments of the news and other political (or even cultural) messages over the years have equipped them with some of the most crucial skills in the field of the media literacy.

Perhaps the most evident of these skills are the youth's critical approaches towards understanding the media messages (content construction) and their production circumstances (e.g., economics, ownership, regulations) which can be seen throughout their online political activities. Acquiring these skills, in large part, has taken place in online communities because this is where individuals are able to express their views and share their knowledge with other members easily and rather safely. Accordingly, these exchanges of information and ideas (as it was the case of the dissident Telegram groups) share the same characteristics that define the participatory culture: low barriers to artistic expression/civic engagement, strong support for creating/sharing content, informal mentorship by more experienced members, a belief that any contribution matters, and some degree of social connection between members. However, the focus of the networking and content sharing in dissident Telegram groups is more on the political news/events, rather than merely cultural affairs, even though it is often difficult to draw a line between culture and politics.

Evidently though, for the Iranian youth, participating in this form of media literacy has never been premediated; they primarily join these online communities (like aforementioned STCs) to express their dissidence and to access the latest relevant news which might include the analyses of the political affairs by more experienced group members or non-member experts. Here, the unintentional engagement in this form of non-conventional media literacy should not be rendered as the members passivity and disinterest in learning from or imparting knowledge to others in the group, but rather, it should be seen as a by-product of the ferment and dynamics of such online communities over time.

Nonetheless, the premise on which this study was based, regarded PML as a remarkable phenomenon with a capacity for exposing and nullifying the state's disinformation campaigns. The evidence for this, however, was made available through examining the contents of some of the most popular STCs. Here, the youth's participation in various forms of politically motivated activities demonstrated their understandings of a broad spectrum of disinformation cases used by the state media during the Mahsa Amini protests.

As subversive online forums, these STCs function not only as a means of mobilizing the protests on the streets, but also as discussion groups for raising awareness and fighting disinformation. However, it is in this latter sense, and through their continual contribution to the collective learning of their members that these STCs gain their true significance as valuable educational venues. Indeed, while the observations on these groups proceeded throughout this study, the patterns of literacy transpired around each disinformation theme, as if the members had less trouble detecting, analysing and discussing them. In this way, the verification of such developments only became possible through a prolong immersion into the posted contents and monitoring the interactions between members. This is because the detection of the collective learning process which takes place in these groups require tracing each disinformation case from the moment it appears in the mainstream media until revelation of its likely nature and the forces behind its production and circulation in the society. An indication for increasing the collective media literacy, therefore, lies in the extent to which the members participate in the examination of evidence for credibility of each piece of news that are, in one way or another, publicized by the state

media sources. In this way, the dialogic interactions within these STCs often make possible outcomes where the sum is greater than the individual contributions, something that Jenkins et al. (2006) refer to as 'collective intelligence'.

Filled with the aspiration to succeed in their quest for freedom and democracy, the young dissidents in Iran are more and more participating in subversive online communities, despite the increasing limitations in accessing Internet and the risks of facing prosecution (Dal & Nisbet, 2022; Tohidi, 2023). At the same time, the expansion of the collective intelligence in these groups around the issues of media operations in society, particularly the ideological/political agendas pursued by the state, gives some cause for optimism about the Iranian youth's democratic goals (Azizi, 2024). In this view, as the Iranian government continues to subjugate the masses through information manipulation, the rise of the PML presents promising capacities for nullifying the state's disinformation campaigns and their preventive effects on the progress of social movements and political change. Hence, although some detractors might cast doubt on the youth's online activism and label it as 'slacktivism' (Christian, 2019), such networking communities' potential for advancing a revolution and restoration of democracy, freedom and human rights is positively vast.

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