Characteristics of Social Networks in the Theory and the Real World

Hassan Yousefi[1] , Ali Mortazavian Farsani [*2]

[1]MA student of Political Science, Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch, Tehran, Iran
[2] Assistant professor, Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch, Tehran, Iran

Abstract:
The development of information and communication technology as one of the most prominent components of the expansion of social networks has revolutionized the quantity, quality, and speed of information flow unprecedentedly. One of the important consequences of the discourse of globalization of communication is the expansion of virtual participatory politics, the politicization of ethnic, racial and religious identities, the gradual undermining of the sovereignty of states, the increased authority of transnational centers, the expansion and intensification of sociopolitical awareness. The most important characteristic of these developments, which the thinkers refer to as the "Electronic Global Village, "can be identified in concepts such as the information revolution, the compaction of time and space, the end of geography, the spread of the world of consciousness, the cybernetic age, etc. One of the increasing undeniable consequences of modern communication and information technologies is their impact on the sociopolitical structure of societies, which has drawn the attention of various schools and socialist political thinkers due to its importance and sensitivity. In Iran, the contemporary sociologists have considered the study of the political function of virtual networks. This issue led to the attention paid to the characteristics of social networks, and thus, these characteristics are addressed in theory and in the real world. For this reason, this paper will attempt to initially introduce social networks and their impact on creating political and social changes. Then, the characteristics of these networks are discussed in theory and in the real world. The method of this study is descriptive-analytical, and the data collection was made by library method using physical and virtual resources.

Keywords: Social networks, Time and Space Compression, Cybernetic Age, Global Village.

Introduction

The emergence of the amazing cyber world is a kind of expression of the existence of different worlds in nature on the one hand, and the ability of humankind to explore and create different areas for human life on the other hand. The integration of real and virtual approaches in the cyber world, especially in

[*]Corresponding Author's Email: a_mortazav@yahoo.com

social networks which is one of the most important examples of the emergence of such an approach, has opened up a new sphere of natural possibilities for human experience. Social networks are, in fact, the reflection of the human needs for the realization of his/her inner need for socialization. The human left in the realm of material life and the human individualized in the cultural, political and social industries are withdrawn from the realization of the inner need for socialization. The cyber world is a kind of escape from this psychological dead-end. The socialist human needs social tendencies; and this tendency, regardless of how it is realized, can be a kind of exclusion from isolation and joining collectivism; this joining can be real or virtual. Hence, social networks connect human with its society (Afrasibi, 2013: 28).

In addition, the development of electronic communications and, subsequently, the use of social networks have transformed social interactions. These networks have served as a new way of communicating and sharing content on the Internet. Today, hundreds of millions of Internet users are members of cyber social networks. Because of this transformation, network space has largely shaped individual and discursive interactions. In this regard, the information revolution in the cyber world has increasingly expanded the role of network social movements of individuals. Then, non-state actors create a new challenge for traditional communities as the new online class with a new discourse. Therefore, the role of social networks cannot be ignored in shaping public opinion and the political changes in the world. Given the fact that social networks have caused major sociopolitical changes across the world in recent years, identifying the characteristics of these

influential networks is necessary and inevitable. People, groups, and parties in particular, have grown the use of cyberspace, in general and social networks, dramatically. Therefore, it seems that the use of social networks has become a new benchmark for influencing political participation across the globe, the political socialization of people, as well as changes in the political climate of the countries. In this paper, social networks, 'characteristics will be dealt with in theory and in the real world.

Research background:
Many researches has been carried out in relation to social networks, their impact on political socialization and their role in political participation inside and outside Iran, some of which will be referred to in the following.
Asadi (2011), in a research entitled "The role of the social network in the evolution of the public sphere in Iran after the tenth presidential election," addressed the role of blogs in the post-2009 presidential elections. Habib Sabouri et al. (2012), in an article entitled "The Impact of Social Networks (Facebook) on Social Identity", and while studying the impact of Facebook on social identity has investigated this subject in a limited statistical population, namely, the students of Islamic Azad University Tehran East Branch in the academic year of 2011-2011.

Hassan Bashir (2012) in an article entitled "Internet Social Networks and Youth Lifestyles "studied the case of the largest Iranian virtual community. This article, published in the Journal of Cultural Research, has described the relationship between young people membership in the largest Iranian virtual community based on Alexa's website statistics and some of the indicators related to lifestyle.

Ghodsi Bayat and Mahmoud Shahabi (2012), in a paper entitled "Virtual Social Networks and Young Users; From the Continuation of Real Life to the Cosmopolitan Experience" published in the Journal of Parliament and Strategy, studied satisfaction and Internet use, with emphasis on Facebook. The result showed that Facebook is not considered as a political space where many young Iranian users are active, but most of them use this social network to facilitate their relationships, revive old communications and create or maintain friendships. While some of the family, geographic, social, cultural, political and economic constraints are offset by the social network, most notably the cosmopolitan experience and familiarity with the modern world. Also, Ghodsi Bayat and Mahmoud Shahabi (2012), in another article titled "Membership Goals and Motives in Social Networks (A Study on the Youth of Tehran)" published in the Journal of Communication Culture in Winter 2012, Issue 52, examined the causes of the presence of young Tehrani's users in virtual social networks and identified the motives and goals of membership in social networks despite the legal ban. Soraya Memar et al. (2012) conducted an article entitled "Virtual Social Networks and the Identity Crisis" (with an emphasis on the identity crisis of Iran) published in the Journal of Social Studies and Research in Iran, Volume I, Issue 4. In this research, the role of social networks in the identity crisis has been addressed.

Ebrahimi et al. (2013) have carried out a study entitled "The Relationship between Social Networks and Political Participation."Oshtoryan and Amirzadeh (2015), in the study of the effects of virtual social networks on political participation, concluded that there is a significant negative relationship between the use of virtual social networks and participation.

In foreign research, Jahanbakhsh and Moon (2014), in a study titled "Prediction of the 2012 US Presidential Election using Twitter", stated that Twitter as a social media platform has been effective in understanding public opinion and predicting the election.

In a Twitter survey, Mengo et al. (2015) studied Twitter web survey on the 2014 local election in Turkey and suggested that 50% of Twitter users were between 19 and 25 years old and 70% of them had access to twitter via smart phones for political conversations, sending and receiving opinions. The results of the analysis showed that the positive and negative tweets in the social network correlate with the actual results of the election.

In 2016, in their study of the social network and political communication in the election, Nalti et al. suggested that it was for the first time in the 2014 European Parliament election that electoral competition took place across the union with new electronic technology. In this election, social networks became an integral part of the campaign, and the results showed that the use of Twitter has been evident among the politicians.

Dadamo et al. (2016), in the analysis of political connections and social networks in Buenos Aires (Argentina's Capital), stated that during the 2013 parliamentary campaign, candidates had different engagements with their supporters through Facebook and Twitter.

In a study in 2016, Lew et al. investigated the impact of political conflicts on political participation in the social networks. However, fewstudies have been done on social networks 'characteristics. In this field, these characteristics have not been studied in the theory and the real world, which points to the necessity of this research.

Social networks

Social network; genesis and concepts

Internet social networks are simply web pages to which people can subscribe, date, discuss, share pictures and videos they like, take the opportunity to comment on the interests and content of others and post their own content by their own taste and opinion, and even imagine their picture in the virtual world of these networks. What makes the presence of social networks important is the public interest of Internet users to these networks; as millions of people in the world subscribe to these networks every day and spend hours on surfing social networks (Afrasibi, 2014: 29).

Therefore, internet social network is a new generation of Internet tools providing more possibilities for interactions, negotiation, and dialogue and, in general, interconnection, in such a way that the concept of Web 2 is associated with the creation of the conventional Internet and Internet social networks allowing for multi-faceted communications among Internet users. Internet social networks not only provide many of the cultural and social needs of their members but also enable members to pursue other social activities in these virtual communities at the same time.

The term internet social network was first introduced in 1960 at the University of Illinois in the United States. Later in 1997, the first social networking site called "Six degrees" allowed creating a profile to its users, but the website was stopped because of failures after three years.

Subsequently, commerce in social media sites in 2002 caused the establishment of Friendster, Orkut, and LinkedIn social networks and the growth of these cybercafé databases. In 2004, Friendster's social network-

ing site with seven million users and MySpace with two million users owned the highest users in this field. In the same year, Mark Zuckerberg at Harvard University set up the Facebook social networking site in pilot mode.

In 2006, the number of users and visitors to social networking sites was exploded. This year, people's public access to Facebook became free, and Twitter got online. The concept of social networks in Iran spread widely among Iranian users in 2004 with the presence of Orkut and grew so fast in a short time that, after Brazil and the United States, Iran became the third country in Orkut. The incredible speed of increasing the users of this network in Iran was almost the subject of many newspapers and news media (Afrasibi, 2013: 31).

According to Rhine Gold, the virtual social network is usually an interactive electronic communication network that defines its scope and consists of a common interest or purpose, although in some cases the communication itself becomes an end (Castells, 2001:145). Thus, the networking of today's society has redefined the meaning of everything and has created new concepts. Economy, culture, society, and even more general concepts such as place and time have also been transformed or are taking new meanings and definitions. The social network strengthens the weak relations, eliminates cold interactions between people who rarely meet each other, and links all the components with similarities in different places; these conditions are well seen in political movements (Rahimi, 2013).

Clark Shirkey, one of the most renowned American communications science theorists, believes that, the more complex, dense, and

operational is the communication area, the better access will have the population to information, the greater opportunities will be provided for people to participate in the public sphere, and more ability will be formed to tolerate political and social currents (2011).

Accordingly, Facebook and Twitter, as the two main social networking representatives, have in practice become the personal page of people in which they can show their personality, thoughts, talents, and skills, and also find fans and followers for themselves or what they can bring to society and others. These very important and broad communicative and technological changes have fueled new ideas and ambiguities that attribute any social transformation in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres to these instruments (Mahdavi, 2013: 75).

Because the social networking space gives the public the opportunity to have direct and indirect access to the right to know. Most importantly, this space has provided a unique opportunity to mobilize social forces, since new movements, such as the movements of women, peace, and the environment, have succeeded in replacing some of the traditional functions of political parties with social networking facilities.

The social network allows social actors to use the relative advantages of this space for drawing their own views, breaking social, cultural and political taboos, finding their contributors, feeling solidarity and, at the same time, not revealing their identity, if they wish. Hence, the social networking space can deepen social participation, reflect the direct voice of the public opinion, bring the community into immediate perception, and promote the monologue governing traditional structures of media and politics to a critical dialogue (Mahdavi, 2013: 78).

Social network and its impact on social transformations

As mentioned above, social networks have created a new social form of communication, which is produced and received, and influences individually while being massive. Yet, it has become a tool for social movements around the world. These movements should be able in three areas in order to achieve their goals:

1. Shaping collective identity;
2. Convincing their followers,
3. Mobilizing their followers;

These movements, with the help of new information technologies, can easily be achieved all three goals (Hamidi, 2011: 65). In these networks, the influence on public opinion and its mobilization are such that a kind of public space is formed through these media, and many people, without seeing each other andexchanging ideas, think and act like each another. On this basis, imagery and beliefs are manipulated and mobilized in an artistic way through the production of the message, slogan and thought using image, graphics, sound, and music. Ultimately, political activity can be blended with everyday life. In addition, virtual social networks are like a laboratory in which social movements examine their ability.

In such a case, social networks do not act only as a political means, but they become a political space. In this regard, the application of social networks allows social movements to use the methods of traditional expressions of protest, such as marches, protests, slogans, and symbols, easily and combine them with new symbolic methods. Accordingly, these movements have the potential to attract the younger class of society and shape public opinion (Hamidi, 2011: 67).

Because public opinion is the set of beliefs or thoughts of a group focused on a

particular topic. Public opinion is a kind of people's judgment in a matter of common discretion at a specific time. Hence, the sum of public opinion is not individual, but the result of individual and collective interaction in a particular cultural, social and economic structure, which can be called a kind of social production that is in many cases determinative and can impose itself on the decision-making of a community (Zareiyan, 2006: 118).

Some elements related to the concept of public opinion can be categorized as such; public opinion includes behaviors spoken by several people and is related to a topic considered by all. This is important for everyone. Public opinion is often associated with the intention of participation (with the notion that there are others who act in the same way). Public opinion is expressed by various social means and is generally a social construct (Lazar, 2007: 39).

Thus, the public opinion is the interactive and dynamic social process that expresses different thoughts and ultimately reflects in the framework of a collective manifestation.

Accordingly, the existence of social networks that have defeated the monopoly of the media has become a mean of communicating and raising political awareness of the people and social transformations. In fact, these new tools simultaneously play several roles; first, they are an easy, up-to-date, and low-cost current of people to communicate with each other; a true connection that is not made via an intermediary such as television, radio and the press; in addition, all users can contribute to the transfer of news and ideas. Moreover, bloggers and other users in these networks criticize official and state media as well as their orientations. Since many videos and images of events and news are available to people online, there is no longer a place to direct public opinion by providing selective news from official sources. Therefore, most people turn toward social networks rather than pursuing news through the official media of the country; social networks are made and covered by themselves. On the other hand, these networks have substituted the parties, groups, and organizations in protest movements, and there is no longer any need be a member of an organization or a special party for protest, nor does it need to be influenced by the leader. Nevertheless, in many cases, the movement of people formed in these spaces and driven out influences the political leaders; therefore, the use of social networks, despite restrictive measures by the government to access by users, is an integral part of shaping the process of anti-government opposition. With regard to the above-mentioned issues, we somehow see the impact of social networks in the present time, but there is a need for different stages of research, multiple researches, and research in different classes and in different places to prove this claim.

Characteristics of mobile social networks
Smart phones with their characteristics and features have made it possible for their users to use virtual social networks. These networks are numerous. Some have been designed and manufactured for smart phones such as Telegram, WhatsApp, Tango, Viber, WeChat, Instagram, and others, like Twitter and Facebook, are also included on the mobile phone because of their great audience in home systems. Some characteristics of mobile social networks include:

1. Mobilization and organization:

Mobile social networks have the potential to collect users at a specific time and place in the real world in order to achieve specific goals. Perhaps this is because users are willing to experience this network connection in the real world (Mostajab, 2016: 65). For example, in relation to the nuclear issue, cyber networks were organized in the form of various campaigns and extensive exchange of ideas in this field to mobilize public opinion and formulate the "public sphere" in support of nuclear rights and the public policies, in particular, the plans of Mr. Rouhani in this regard. The spread of the images of people's happiness across the country in response to the early agreement of Iran's nuclear negotiations and G5+1 and support for the Islamic Republic of Iran's nuclear team in cyber and real- the self-esteem and the bargaining power of Mr. Rouhani's government in the interior and in the international community, so that the impasse and taboo of several years were broken with the entry of Iran into the relevant negotiations.

Although the strategy of the talks of Rouhani's government with the West, so-called "win-win" program, aimed at establishing a common understanding and solving long-standing problems between Iran and the West can be studied and retrieved by Habermas's communicative action, the continuation of this process by the parties provides a clear perspective on how to understand and share efforts in different areas.

Also, in response to the hostile policies of the Saudi government against the Islamic Republic of Iran, and in particular the scourge of two Iranian teenagers at Jeddah airport, virtual networks organized a massive propaganda campaign and mobilized public opinion on the "public sphere" in this regard; so that, just 48 hours after the incidence at Jeddah airport, more than 50,000 websites, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, and etc. reflected the news and condemned the Saudi government (Tabnak website, 2015).

Following the extensive psychological propaganda and campaigns to respond to this issue in cyberspace, various political and social classes of Iran regardless of any intellectual, political or religious taste, condemned the Saudi government and paved the way for various protests and gatherings in political and public circles, especially in front of Saudi government agencies in the cities of the country. In response to requests from public opinion, the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has also sanctioned the Umrah Hajj until the second announcement. The reflection of the massive disaster of Mena, where more than a thousand people died, in the cyberspace has put the Saudi government attempting to hide the dimensions and details of the incident under intense pressure from the world's governments and communities, and endorsed the Saudi royal family's incompetence in the management of the Islamic Holy Sepulcher of Islam (Keshishyan and Heydari, 2017: 8-10).

2. Dating and developing intimate relationships:

The mobile phone is a device that significantly reduced the time constraints on communication due to its availability for the individual at any time and any place, and has made this connection round-the-clock. This connection is constantly creating deep relationships. The development of intimate relationships is a feature of the virtual social networks because individuals are able to introduce themselves as they wish. It causes the apparent expansion of friendships, which, of course, has its own dangers and consequences.

3. Multimedia:

Today, smart phones with new technologies allow sending and receiving content in the form of text, audio, image, video, or a combination of all of these. For the same reason, there is no single media. People, because of this multimedia feature, prefer to be involved in the production and distribution of news and information, and not to be just listeners or viewers. Contributing to the production and dissemination of news makes it possible for people to have the opportunity to send and receive content, and add their comments. As a result, the broadcast of news and content is not dictated from up down, but it finds interactive nature. This is what enhances people's contributions to create content.

4. Transparency more than in the past:

Social networks on mobile phones have made the world more transparent than social networks on personal computers. It is because of the user's perpetual access to the mobile phone, by which people can quickly tell or know about the events. Being up-to-date and online can cause people to know about news, information, and events all over the world in a second. They can react quickly. Speed, variety, and versatility are the characteristics of social networking news and information on the phone, but the difficulty is to distinguish between truths and false. That is why people should pay more attention to news, information, commentary, and analyses.

5. High speed:

Permanent availability of mobile phones enables users of mobile social networks to receive and send the information they want quickly. So, information is disseminated to day more rapidly than ever before. The high speed helps different groups to deliver their news, information, and messages to their audience within a minute. Although high speed is among the positive characteristics of mobile social networks, the concern is the analysis that may be frivolous to the public.

6. Economic substitution for a Phonecall and SMS:

Perhaps this characteristic is one of the reasons why some users use these Internet networks. Some subscribers prefer to communicate with the person or people they want through Wireless Internet waves rather than paying for calls or SMS. In this case, there is no concern for the user about the duration of the talk, and the person can have a text, audio or video conversation without paying a fee, which is much more economical.

7. Accessibility:

The existence of social networks on mobile phones has made it possible for users to access in any situation and completely removes spatial and temporal constraints. Although being meta-spatial and meta-temporal is an essential characteristic of the social networks as a whole, before their presence on mobile phones, the use of this new media required individual access to a personal computer that created many restrictions for users, because they did not have access to such a system everywhere and under all situations. Today, the presence of virtual social networks on mobile phones has made social networks more and more abundant and has eliminated all possible constraints. It makes people access news and information whenever and wherever they choose.

8. **More personalization of the processor device and security enhancement:**

The mobile phone is a completely personal device that is not possible to be used by other people, unlike PCs. This characteristic, to some extent, increases the user's security. Issues, like forgetting proper logging out of social networking site, the presence of personal folders in the processor system memory and so on promote the user's security with the help of mobile social networking platforms (Mostajab, 2016: 89).

Conclusion:

The historical, cultural and political richness of the Iranian society has caused the elite and public opinion to be sensitive to the political and social changes and has introduced Iran as one of the most political countries in the world. However, due to some structural damages as well as political and cultural problems of society, there are increasing cultural, social, economic, and political gaps in the community or between the society and the government.

In the light of the weakness of the official institutions in managing and responding to the legitimate demands of society in different areas, modern communication and information technologies have provided a favorable opportunity to attract and direct public opinion. Increasing willingness to new communication technologies such as satellite, virtual networks, etc. endorses this claim, despite the government's ban on using them due to conflict with the religious, social and political norms of the society. According to the official announcement of the relevant institutions inside and outside, Iran is ranked high in exploiting the technical and information technologies in the world. On the other hand, according to the issues and damages expressed, the presence and activity in cyberspace and the operation of information technology in Iran are of high political and security sensitivity (over the global standard) so that the smallest political and social change in Iran has political and security reflection in cyberspace.

In a nutshell, although the negative effects of networks may sometimes be a nuisance, its positive dimensions in the expansion of democracy and the principle of universal supervision in various economic, political, cultural areas and accountability of the authorities and the relevant institutions (especially in response to the growing phenomenon of economic corruptions as one of the priorities) should be evaluated positive and beneficial for national goals and interests.

However, obstacles and damages in the political, cultural and social structure in Iran have highlighted the importance and sensitivity of the phenomenon of "modern communication and information technologies "and "public sphere."Problems and barriers related to the parties and lack of inclusive and effective political parties, civil institutions and so on prevent the satisfaction of the political demands of the Iranian society, especially the young and educated people.

As a result, the cyberspace is an appropriate ground for designing and pursuing demands and expressing psychological and political protests. Considerations and problems regarding the performance of the official media of the Islamic Republic of Iran, such as: the proper coverage of the news and developments of the community in different fields, transparent and appropriate information to the public, the variety and attractiveness of the programs, have discouraged public confidence in the performance of these media. Therefore, one of the main reasons for the increasing tendency toward using virtual networks and foreign media came from this problem.

The diversity and attractiveness of cyber-space, the freedom of action of individuals in this space, and the lack of common constraints of the real space on the presence and activity of individuals in cyberspace have attracted a significant proportion of emotional and adventurous young people, who are disturbed mentally and disappointment of the future. The possibility of civil dissent and disapproval of government policies and decisions in cyberspace is one of the reasons for the sensitivity, importance, and its highlighted position in Iranian society.

Since it is not possible to express, in various ways, dissatisfaction and opposition to the government's plans and decisions in the real world, virtual networks play this role in the community. In other words, cyberspace in Iran is the venue for conflict between civilian and governmental discourse. For example, despite the massive propaganda of the Islamic Republic of Iran's official media in support of Palestinian resistance, Yemen, etc., it has a very small reflection on virtual networks. In contrast, virtual networks, broadly and comprehensively support the events such as the presence of women in sports and political affairs, the support of political, social, cultural and artistic figures who are banned by the government. Some hasty and unparalleled policies of some states in various economic, cultural, domestic and foreign areas (with political or non-political intentions) provoke social inflammation and created false waves in the cyber and real world and allow the hostile foreigners or aliens to make the community insecure and escalate the gap between the people and the sovereignty.

The weakness of specific policy and strategic planning of the Islamic Republic of Iran in dealing with emerging phenomena such as

modern communication and information technologies has led to the passive, inconsistent, short-term, and obscure response of the government agencies to this phenomenon. In the field of cyberspace and modern communication technologies, some of the officials and directors (among whom there are religious scholars) consider further freedom of action and the elimination of the prohibition. Exploiting it against another part of the authorities and decision makers is radical and contrary to any modern communication and information technology.

In contrast, some other authorities and decision-makers have strict and radical reaction toward any ICT. However, the weakness of the religious and cultural institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran in reproducing and updating jurisprudential and religious jurisprudence with the needs and requirements of the community and the new technologies has added to the frustration in policy-making, political and social developments arisen from modern technologies.

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