Muslim World Journal of Human Rights

Volume 7, Issue 1

2010

Article 4

Has the Information Revolution In Muslim Societies Created New Publics?

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Abstract

In this essay, at the outset the meaning of 'public,' as it will be deployed in the article, will be delineated. Then by surveying new media, this study intends to show how the information revolution can bring social and political change in Muslim societies, especially in the Middle East. However, in this way a particular level of differentiation will be provided by distinguishing not just such media as satellite broadcasting from the Internet, but the second from the first generation of the Internet. With regard to the relation between online activities and offline social and political behavior, particularly the role of some new Web 2.0 applications, such as Facebook and Twitter, in changing Muslim publics will be discussed and some specific examples from the Muslim world, especially Iran, will be presented. Finally, the implication of this study would be that the Internet may have something to do with the transition from authoritarianism to democracy.

KEYWORDS: new media, information revolution, digital social networks, Muslim societies, public sphere

Introduction

Just at the dawn of the twenty first century, due to new information technologies the world was dramatically changed. Satellite television and the Internet especially have had a major role in changing the way we see, think and communicate our ideas to other people. In this sense, it seems that these new forms of communication could have a great impact on social and cultural structures by changing the public sphere. However, the relation between the information revolution and the public sphere is complicated, and it depends on determining what kind of media, when and where we are discussing. The following sections deal with this issue by considering Muslim societies, as the case study.

The Public Sphere

‘Public’ is something that is relating to or affecting all the people of a community and is accessible to or shared by all members of the community. John Dewey argued that a public only develops when it has a reason and comes together around an issue of substantial or serious significance (Dewey 1946, 126). Hannah Arendt, also, noted that the term ‘public’ signifies two closely interrelated but not altogether identical phenomena: First, “everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity.” Second, “the term ‘public’ signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it” (Arendt 1958, 50-51). As Craig Calhoun (1997, 254) indicated the main argument of Hannah in the public issue is the plurality. For her, in a public, the sameness is not important but what is required for a successful collective action is the presence of different people with a capacity of receptive communication.

However, today the concept of ‘public’ is associated with the works of Jürgen Habermas. He introduced the ‘public sphere’ as a space between “the formal structure of political authority and the space of households” (Eickelman and Salvatore 2002). For Habermas, the public sphere, ideally, is an intermediate space in which access is guaranteed to all citizens, different ideas are presented freely, and “private citizens assemble to form a public body” (Habermas 2001, 102). The public sphere is based on “rational-critical debate” which is protected from “interference of public authority” (Habermas 1989, 188). Habermas famously indicated coffeehouses and salons as the practical emergence of the public sphere of the early modernity where various people could gather and discuss matters that concerned them.

In contrast to Habermas, Calhoun believes that the public sphere cannot be conceptualized as “rational debate and decision making” but as something for

development of “social solidarity as a matter of choice rather than necessity” (Calhoun 2002, 148). While Habermas sees the public sphere as a base for political identity by taking the place of “preestablished culture”, Calhoun thinks the collective identity “is formed first, and activity in the public sphere is about steering it, not constituting it” (Ibid., 155-158). He adds that civil society is a base of the public sphere by increasing the “individual autonomy” and so, by this way the public sphere can influence state (Ibid., 159). Calhoun also emphasizes the plurality of the public sphere by saying that it includes a number of different “more or less overlapping publics” (Ibid., 162).

With regard to the quality of the public sphere in the early modernity, Nancy Fraser (1990) also argued that the bourgeois public sphere discriminated against “women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians” and “they found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics” in order to “formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.” Seyla Benhabib also noted that distinction between public and private in Habermas’ work leads women’s issues into the private realm and out of the discussion in the public sphere (Benhabib 1992, 89-90).

In a somewhat different way, Gerard Hauser defined the public sphere as a “discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment” (Hauser 1998, 86). He proposed that public spheres were formed around the dialogue surrounding issues, rather than the identity of the population that is engaging in the discourse. In other words, the public sphere is not class-based (Hauser 1999, 61).

Michael Warner (2002) also identifies some criteria for defining publics. He believes that a public is “self-organized” in a sense that it is independent from the state and any other preexisting institutions. Therefore, Warner concludes that even common interest is not the basis of the public sphere, but it is “projected from the public discourse”. Relation between the strangers is in the nature of publics and a public in which “everyone could be known personally” would be no real public. Moreover, he notes that a public “commences with the moment of attention” and it “ceases to exist when attention is no longer predicated.” However, he notes that the public sphere needs “the reflexive circulation of discourse” to remain active.

In summary, for the following arguments, I consider the concept of ‘the public sphere’ as a real or virtual space for sharing different ideas by different people who have something in common. The public sphere is an intermediate space, as Habermas emphasizes, but access is not necessary guaranteed to all people and ‘trust’ would be an important factor for the membership. The debates in the public sphere could influence the state or develop the social solidarity. They also could mentally relieve depressed people in an authoritarian state where the

opposition voices are suppressed and the members have no possibility but this discursive space, to free themselves from the closed situation. Finally, publics, in their new forms, could form a nationwide or worldwide public by connecting to each other.

The Information Revolution and Social Change

While a public emerges when a number of people engage in a specific discourse, the role of media in development of the public is vital. Traditionally, in places such as coffeehouses, salons or mosques the public was limited to face to face communications. However, the early print capitalism created an “imagined community” of co-readers as highlighted by Benedict Anderson. As a result, the concept of ‘public’ was no longer limited to a special place and in narrow scale (Eickelman and Anderson 1999, 42).

The advent of mass media (radio, newspaper, television and satellite channels) in the 20th century dramatically improved the public communication and connected the regional publics to form the wider ones. Later in the 1990s, the Internet introduced the cyberspace and facilitated communications with anonymous others. This was a new phase of communication that by its higher interactive quality, “lower barriers to entry for producers” and “more symmetrical relation between producers and consumers” than older media, created virtual spaces like its “real counterparts such as coffeehouses and other public spaces” (Anderson 2003; Tajbakhsh 2003; also see Roy, 2004:183).

However, because of their top-down nature, many believe that these new media, in general, did not create an ideal public sphere. Even by the invention of the Internet, most people remained as receivers not senders, and there was a social gap between the producers and consumers (Anderson 2003). The content available on the Internet was mainly generated by centralized sources, such as government agencies, businesses, established media or other organizations and its accessibility required little user participation beyond typing in the web address (Verdier 2009). Some critics such as Andreas Kitzmann even went so far to say that the expansion of the cyber culture was “motivated not by the promise of human emancipation and enlightenment but by fantasies of power and complete control” (Lawrence 2001).

In the case of the Arab world, Mamoun Fandy (2000) also rejects this idea that new media in the Middle East could change “the political and social realities of the region” by creating new publics. His main argument is that those who believe these sort of things have underestimated the role of “trust” in the Middle East societies. Fandy, even in his recent work, argues instead of “the language of those at the helm of the state,” the discourse of Islamists who generally do not have access to the mass media is still dominant and the Arab states are on the

weak side (Fandy 2007, 120). He explains that in the Arab world, state-dominated media as well as political oppositions “have failed to win the trust of their audience” and instead, people trust the traditional face to face ways of communication in places such as the *suaq* (market) and mosques (Fandy 2000).

However, the story of the information revolution and its impact on the Muslim world is not as simple as Fandy depicts. Moreover, in order to understand the role of these new technologies, especially the Internet, in social changes, we have to look at them as ongoing phenomena. Hence, in this issue we must look forward to seeing: ‘what would happen in the near future?’, based on its signs that are discernable in Muslim societies today.

The information revolution was not a historical event, but as Irving Fang indicated, it includes six different phases: writing, printing, mass media, entertainment, the toolshed home (“what made a House, a Home”), and the information highway. Each of these phases “led toward a greater sharing and more specialization of knowledge than previously existed.” (Fang 1997, xviii). Each of them has influenced our daily activities in the way that we cannot perceive a life without them. The world has changed because not only the information is more accessible than before, but also gradually more and more individuals can produce information and so, everyone gets power, good or bad.

The information revolution, also, has contributed to the fragmentation of authority in the Muslim world (Eickelman and Anderson 1999, 1). As Francis Robinson noted, initially, the print industry helped the religious authority to monopolize religious publications and control the religious discourse. Nevertheless, the increased number of educated people who had access to the Islamic classics in their vernaculars undermined the authority of *ulama* (traditional religious scholars), who had lost their “monopoly of the transmission of knowledge” (Robinson 1993). Similarly, in the academic level, new Muslim intellectuals or as Peter Mandaville (2001, 156) called, “hybrid Muslim intellectuals,” who have trained out of the traditional seminaries seriously challenge the *ulama*.

In this way, today the Internet plays a major role to spread knowledge. Google, for example, has digitalized near 10 million books; numerous web sites contain lots of free e-books, scientific and religious documentaries and many other educational contents. In the case of Muslim societies, by using such information technologies, Merlyna Lim argues, “people can feel they have acquired enough Islamic knowledge to guide important life decisions without having recourse to more traditional scholars such as an imam or Islamic teachers in local mosques” (Lim 2005, 44-45).

Another aspect of the information revolution is what I call ‘the trust competition’. By this I mean that since the advent of the mass media by the invention of radio, television and especially satellite television as well as the

spread of newspapers in wider scenes, different voices have been competing to find and save more and more audiences. In this context, the failure of the state media in the Muslim world, in general, is either because of the contradiction between what people see and sense, and what the state media try to display as the truth, or because of other rival media which report the news more accurately. The former famously was seen in the case of the Arab-Israel's war in 1967 when all Arab state media declared victory over Israel, but it was reversed (Fandy 2000). The later, for example, happened in Iran during the reform period when in 1998 the reformist newspaper, *Jameah*, was published and within a few weeks reached to its 300,000 copies per day. This success was just because for the first time readers could find news that were never published in the state media (Abdo 2003).

In short, we can see a great share of media in the modern world. In the case of the Arab world, besides foreign satellite channels, those media that run more independently and display the opposite points of view, such as *Al-Jazeera* television, with near 35 million viewerships overall (Hudson 2002), and newspapers like the Saudi-owned London-based *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* as well as *Al-Hayat*, although they have some bias, relatively have open footholds among the Arab publics (Anderson 2003; Mneimneh 2003). In addition, some popular religious figures, such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who preach and issue *fatwās* (religious ruling) on radio and satellite television programs have captured the publics in many parts of the Muslim world (Anderson 2003).

The high potential of new media on the Muslim publics is also discernible while all authoritative states "feel themselves under threat from exiled religious [or secular] opposition groups who make use of the latest information technology to question the legitimacy of the regimes" (Mandaville 2001, 171). Similarly, the banning of satellite dishes in countries like Iran, shows the deep possible effects that this type of media could have on the Iranian publics. However, new media, on the one hand, can be skillfully exploited by the states to stabilize the status quo in their societies. On the other hand, with their specific characteristics, new media have a capacity to penetrate through the societies to destabilize them, and make it difficult for the states to fully control these media. In this sense, "new media may resemble a Trojan horse" (Meyer and Moors 2006, 11).

Rise of the Internet in the Muslim World

When we talk about the information revolution, we have to put the Internet in a separate position than other media. However, it is also impossible to look at the Internet as an invention, without considering its exceptional evolution. In fact, what we know today as 'Web 2.0' or 'social networks', are radically different from the Internet in the early 1990s (Ovaska and Leino 2008, 2). In the following

sections, the evolutionary role of the Internet in reshaping the public sphere will be examined by close attention to the case of the Muslim world.

Although, the Internet grew fast in the West, its growth in the Middle East was very slow. On the one hand, lack of technological infrastructures, but on the other hand, the cultural resistance to this new invention hindered the rapid development of the Internet in this world. In fact, in some more traditional parts of the Islamic world, the Internet was initially considered as a corrupt space (Wheeler 2001, 187-188). Nevertheless, most Muslim states gradually found the Internet useful for economics, business and scientific developments (Hudson 2002).

While in 2003, the number of Internet users per 100 inhabitants in the U.S. was 50, this number for the Arab countries “ranged from 0.2 in Sudan to 8.8 in Kuwait, and countries such as Egypt, Saudi-Arabia and Syria had 0.9, 1.3 and 0.4 users respectively” (Rogan 2006, 12). Although these rates were very low, the Internet had found its customers: youth, in authoritarian regimes with cultural and political restrictions. This could be one reason for the rapid growth of the Internet (1360.2 %) in the Middle East, between 2000 and 2009 (see Table 1 for the details of Internet usage rate in the Middle East).

Table 1: Middle East Internet Usage
(Source www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm)

MIDDLE EAST	Population (2009 Est.)	Usage, in Dec/2000	Internet Usage, Latest Data	% Population (Penetration)	User Growth (2000-2009)	(%) of Table
Bahrain	727,785	40,000	250,000	34.4 %	525.0 %	0.5 %
Iran	66,429,284	250,000	23,000,000	34.6 %	9,100.0 %	48.0 %
Iraq	28,945,657	12,500	275,000	1.0 %	2,100.0 %	0.6 %
Israel	7,233,701	1,270,000	5,263,146	72.8 %	314.4 %	11.0 %
Jordan	6,342,948	127,300	1,500,500	23.7 %	1,078.7 %	3.1 %
Kuwait	2,691,158	150,000	900,000	33.4 %	500.0 %	1.9 %
Lebanon	4,017,095	300,000	1,570,000	39.1 %	423.3 %	3.3 %
Oman	3,418,085	90,000	469,000	13.7 %	421.1 %	0.7 %
Palestine (West Bk.)	2,461,167	35,000	355,500	14.4 %	915.7 %	0.7 %
Qatar	833,285	30,000	436,000	52.3 %	1,353.3 %	0.9 %
Saudi Arabia	28,686,633	200,000	7,200,000	25.1 %	3,500.0 %	15.0 %
Syria	20,178,485	30,000	3,565,000	17.7 %	11,783.3 %	7.4 %
United Arab Emirates	4,798,491	735,000	2,860,000	59.6 %	289.1 %	6.0 %
Yemen	23,822,783	15,000	320,000	1.3 %	2,033.3 %	0.7 %
TOTAL	202,138,516	3,284,800	47,964,146	23.7 %	1,360.2 %	100.0 %

In many Muslim countries that because of cultural issues, people in general and youth in particular, have limitations in terms of *hijāb* (the head covering traditionally worn by Muslim women) and openness of talking and hanging out, the Internet with its new virtual publics is seen as a useful tool. In this sense, using the Internet by youth is creating “new forms of communication across gender lines, interrupting traditional social rituals, and giving young people new autonomy in how they run their lives” (Wheeler 2003). In the case of Iran, as Babak Rahimi observed:

[T]he rise of “coffee-nets”, voice chats that have become an inexpensive way for the young to converse online, challenge the Islamic government and its oppressive imposition of moral guidelines for the separation of the sexes in everyday public places.... [T]he new generation has built online communities where couples meet to chat, young men dress as they wish and young women go uncovered without being harassed (Rahimi 2003).

In other words, the real public in streets and parks where people are watched is completely different with the virtual public behind a computer. People do chat together with the opposite sex for hours, even many of the religious people, without feeling those old defined limitations. In this sense, the definition of ‘sin’ is somewhat different in the cyberspace than in the real world.

Far from this type of the Internet usage, the Islamist groups have been the pioneers in the Muslim countries in using the Internet for their own goals. They found the Internet as a gift to spread their ideologies all over the world. For them the Internet had the potential to facilitate identity formations without territorial limitations. As a result, the notion of the unity of believers, *ummah*, was reinforced among some Muslim activists (Roy, 2004, 183). However, this does not mean that necessarily the national identities became obsolete in the cyberspace. For many of the Islamist groups, the Internet creates multiple identities that “strengthen [a] national identity while also fostering a deterritorialized identity” (Lim, 2005, viii). One example of this situation was *Laskar Jihad* in Indonesia, “which deftly combined Java-centered nationalism with Islamic fundamentalism to characterize discontent on the outer Indonesian island of Maluku as an anti-nationalist, anti-Islam, Judeo-Christian conspiracy”. (Ibid.; also see Bräuchler 2004). The Internet, especially for less dominant groups, has had another function as a way to “bypass the monopoly of states over conventional Media” and “avoid surveillance and censorship” (Lim 2005, 6). However, in countries in which the Internet penetration is weak, they need to link to other accessible media.

Furthermore, the Internet in the Muslim world introduced new concepts such as ‘cyber *jihad* (holy war)’ or ‘jihadism online’ that reinforced the idea of global jihadism (Rogan 2006, 7). Since the advent of the Internet, many jihadi websites have been created to encourage both physical and virtual jihad. The latter one is mainly created by some Muslims, who believe the world is dominated by “Western-based media biased against Islam” (Lim 2005, 22). Hence, they use the free space of the Internet to introduce the true Islam, as they believe. In the case of physical jihad, many jihadist websites use their space for recruitment, propaganda, finding financial support, publicizing their activities or communicating with their members around the world. Even some of them have sections for virtual jihad training with multimedia videos such as al-Qaida’s extensive 700 megabyte ‘Encyclopedia for the Preparation for jihad’ (Rogan 2006, 26). In short, it seems that the Muslim activists have been far ahead of the other groups such as Arab nationalists in exploiting the possibilities of the Internet, to capture the Muslim publics (Hudson 2002).

Web 2.0: the People’s Media

Today’s Internet, Web 2.0, is completely different from the one that emerged in the mid-1990s, and really deserves to be called the people’s media. As mentioned earlier, at first, although individuals had more sources of information on the Internet to choose than before the invention of the Internet, the contents were generally derived from the established media. Even when someone created his/her own web page, usually nobody except a few users visited the site (Ovaska and Leino 2008, 4). Web 2.0 dramatically has changed this situation; however, this change was not because of “any specific technical updates, but rather...an ongoing trend regarding how software creators and web users utilize the Internet” (Verdier 2009, 6).

Web 2.0 emphasizes on the interaction between the users. In this way, Internet users can produce content and share it with the others. In addition, Web 2.0 applications “have introduced a new format of websites that allows individuals to comment on and discuss websites’ content” (Ibid., 52). The personal websites have been updated to blogs, which can link with the other blogs to form blogging communities based on similar interests. As Aaron Barlow argues, “before the blogs, the topics for debate...were brought to the public rather than arising from the people. In the blogosphere, stories arising through popular interest and exploration” (Barlow 2007, 4). Even, some established media use information from the blogosphere. The New York Times, for example, “reprints blog posts from the previous week in its Sunday issue” (Verdier 2009,

85). In this sense, we might say that “networked communication has begun to surround the traditional media system” (Friedland et al. 2006).

However, some scholars argue that this large networked public sphere creates new forms of hierarchy. Many smaller networks attach to each other and form a denser hub of discussion; “hubs are more likely to link to sites that are similar than to those that are different... [So,] new forms of hierarchy emerge, with some sites capturing the lion’s share of traffic and attention, and many others gaining virtually none” (Ibid.). In contrast, Yochai Benkler maintains that even in this situation, “clusters of moderately read sites provide platforms for vastly greater numbers of speakers than were heard in the mass-media environment” (Benkler 2006, 242).

Cass Sunstein (2007, 13), also has a negative view about the blogosphere due to its information overload that leads to both the fragmentation and polarization of the public sphere as “people are mainly listening to louder echoes of their own voices.” However, Benkler (2006, 257) opposes this kind of view by saying “the practices of linking...or quotation of the position one is criticizing, and the widespread practice of examining and criticizing the assumptions and assertions of one’s interlocutors actually point the other way.” Nevertheless, it seems that the warning of Sunstein with regard to the increased number of the Internet users who are seeking out information from partisan sites sharing their own viewpoint, is serious.

In its last phase, the interaction nature of Web 2.0 was even more developed by introducing the digital social networks such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter. Social networking websites “enable individuals to search for and link with people with whom they share interests” (Verdier 2009, 61). As a result, individuals are more and more watched and feel themselves as a determinant participant in a virtual public. Therefore, media rapidly go from ‘one-to-many’ toward ‘many-to-many’, while the distinction between producers and receivers is really blurred. In this sense, Barlow suggests that “mass media has now become ‘massed’ media” (Barlow 2007, 5).

In short, Web 2.0 has created situations very close to what Habermas has in mind as the ideal public sphere. However, the rise of Web 2.0 is a very new phenomenon, and yet there are no conclusive studies detailing the definite correlation between virtual participation and actual participation or civil engagement (Friedland et al. 2006). Nevertheless, in a society with an authoritarian state in which people cannot appear and speak in physical publics as they really are, these virtual social networks may play an important role in the social life of the people. In this context, the impact of Facebook, as the most popular social network, on social and political movements will be illustrated in the following sections.

Facebook, the new face of public

Among the various digital social networks, Facebook, launched in 2004, has gained a special position. Facebook is now the most visited site in the world just passed Yahoo.com (see Figure 1). Facebook, in a full interactive interface, allows its users to share personal information, opinions and media with their friends and even friends of the friends (Westling 2007). In addition, “groups are formed on Facebook gathering the fans of some celebrities, gathering groups who call for a certain idea or oppose a certain issue” (Al Ezzi et al. 2008).

Figure 1: rapid rise of Facebook

(Source: www.techcrunch.com, by Erick Schonfeld on Aug. 4, 2009)

(Now, Facebook is the most visited Site. See: <http://indyposted.com/25048/facebook-number-one-site/>)

Facebook is shaped based on ‘trust’. The “inherent trust and credibility that the site offers” is the reason why news and information circulate in such a rapid way in Facebook (Efaw 2008). However, the problem of such digital publics is exactly what quoted earlier from Sunstein: Because everyone chooses his/her own friends who usually think in a similar way that he/she does, actually he/she filters other views. In this situation, rumors easily spread through the network. Nevertheless, the more different people join to Facebook, the more likely different groups of people have mutual friends and so, the publics become more balanced.

Facebook and Social Movements

In recent years, Internet in general and digital social networks in particular, have interconnected with social movements. In the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign,

for example, especially Facebook groups had a major role in mobilizing and organizing thousands of supporters of Barak Obama (Sanson 2008). In countries that the freedom of speech is limited, also people increasingly turn to digital social networks as an alternative way to participate in social and political discourses. In Egypt, for instance, public protests occurred on the 6th of April & 4th of May 2008 “against the Egyptian government to ask for better salaries, control the high inflation rates and solve [the] bread and steel crisis” (Al Ezzi et al. 2008). A study is shown that a “Facebook group’s head and members were able to function as opinion leaders and play a role in making the public think about the two intended protests” (Ibid.). The Facebook group and “those opinion leaders, forced the Egyptian newspapers and talk shows to talk about the protests even though the government did not want any emphasis or discussions about the protests, whether in newspapers or television talk shows” (Ibid.).

However, the most famous example is the recent political crisis in Iran following the presidential election in June 2009. Media played a major role in mobilizing people both before and after the election. The television hot debates between the candidates from June 2 to June 8, proved the power of mass media in stimulating the whole public. However, in the closed political space of Iran, the most important media, especially for the young Iranians, is the Internet (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Blogosphere and email communication). Before the election, Facebook and Twitter were mainly dominated by the supporters of the primary opposition candidate, Mir Hossein Mousavi. Lots of YouTube clips and documents against the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadi Nejad, were circulated in Facebook to persuade people not to vote for him. The green color as the symbol of Mousavi’s campaign was overwhelmingly being used by his supporters in Facebook and thousands of users tinted their profile pictures green. In addition, before and after the important events, such as the television debates, Facebook’s pages became full of hot discussions. Figure 2 shows how dramatically Iranian people turned to Facebook near the election.

After the election and the victory of Ahmadi Nejad by alleged vote rigging, the face of Facebook was changed and discontented voters changed their profile pictures to “where is my vote?”, took their protest to the Web. During the first weeks after the election, sharing documents that intended to prove the election fraud was the major activity in Facebook. In addition, news of protests bloomed on the Internet, and Facebook as well as Twitter mainly were used to locate and coordinate new protests. Meanwhile, films of the demonstrations and the violence against the demonstrators were being uploaded in YouTube and rapidly circulated in Facebook and blogs. One of the most impressive video clips depicted the death time of a young woman, Neda Aqa-Sultan, who was shot dead by militia during a demonstration in Tehran. This tragic clip that shocked the world, rapidly spread in the Internet and was broadcast by foreign news agencies.

Consequently, Neda became a symbol of protest. The discussions about Neda finally affected the ruling circle and even Ahmadi Nejad ordered to investigate the incident.

Figure 2: Iranians turning to Facebook during the crisis
(Source: <http://digital.venturebeat.com>)

Facebook and other social networks had such an impact on the public that the government finally blocked Facebook, Youtube, some news websites and Twitter, a few days after the election. Nevertheless, because of the nature of the Internet, it is difficult to fully control these digital media and so, this new wave of filtering did not hinder the young Iranians to access these sites as many of them found a way to pass the filters. In summary, “by taking the fight online, both domestic and foreign critics of the Iranian government showed the potential that social networking sites have in reaching wider audiences” (Kishtwari 2009).

Conclusion

As has been argued, the relation between the information revolution and the Muslim publics is complicated, and it depends on determining what kind of media, when and where we are discussing. For example, the Internet is a broad term; do we mean the Internet as it was in the mid-1990s or the digital social networks in the last few years? In Iran, with 23 million Internet users or in Yemen with 320 thousand users? In an authoritarian regime or not? However, the short answer is yes, new media, in general, can (and did) reshape publics in Muslim societies.

It was a time when 'public' and 'private' were distinguishable, but today, Web 2.0 tools "bypass many of the barriers to visibility found in the established media" and act as watchdogs (Verdier, 2009). In this sense, since it is too difficult to censor new media and control how information is disseminated through them, the states no longer can feel free to do whatever they want without being accused by public opinions. This was exactly what happened in the recent political crisis in Iran. A few years ago, it was easy for the state to keep big incidents completely secret; whereas today, a woman dies in a street in Tehran, millions of people immediately read and watch the story in weblogs, Facebook or YouTube, make comments on the event and organize protests.

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