

ICT23-002 - Beyond computational propaganda and bot activism: Investigating social media suppression in authoritarian regimes

Abstract

There are rising concerns about social media suppression (SMS) in non-democratic societies. Social media are somehow people's only hope for raising their voices in authoritarian regimes, and suppressing them could have detrimental effects on citizens' democratic efforts. However, the existing literature on how social media movements are manipulated and suppressed focuses relatively on Western democracies. Given the rising number of such nefarious activities in non-democratic societies and the inherent differences between authoritarian regimes and democratic countries, we need more research on these contexts to understand the breadth and dynamics of SMS in contemporary societies better.

The existing literature in this area also mainly revolves around 'computational propaganda (CP).' This concept, however, is limited as it minimizes the problem of CP to its computational aspects. In addition, the extant research concentrates on computational methods. However, the efficiency and validity of these methods in investigating SMS is under question. Furthermore, this line of research mainly focuses on false information as the primary tactic and social bots, i.e., algorithmic accounts on social media that imitate human behavior, as the main actors of suppression. I argue SMS is the interplay between social media spaces, sociopolitical contexts, and hybrid media systems. Thus, we need to go beyond CP and bot activism to understand the depth and breadth of SMS as a computational and discursive process. Finally, when authoritarian regimes conduct manipulative campaigns on multi-platforms, empirical research relatively focuses on single platforms like Twitter to date.

In order to address these fallacies, BeyondCBA combines discourse and rhetoric analyses with computational methods, e.g., Social Network Analysis and Natural Language Processing, to dig deeper into the multifaceted and complex dynamics of SMS. BeyondCBA focuses on the #MahsaAmini movement on four popular platforms in Iran, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram, to understand how computational techniques were combined with discursive practices by inauthentic agents, not only social bots, to suppress this movement. #MahsaAmini was a nationwide movement to protest against the brutality and anti-women discourse and rules in Iran, which became the center of attention worldwide.

BeyondCBA liberates extant research from its restricted hypotheses based on a computational understanding of manipulation on social media, providing fresh insights into new actors and SMS tactics across different platforms. BeyondCBA contributes to our understanding of SMS in contemporary societies by providing fresh theoretical insights and empirical evidence from an understudied but relevant context: Iran.

Scientific disciplines:

Political communication (70%) | Digital humanities (30%)

Keywords:

Social media suppression; Twitter; Computational propaganda; Disinformation; Critical discourse analysis; Rhetoric theory; Automated text analysis

Principal Investigator: Hossein Kermani
Institution: University of Vienna



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Further links to the persons involved and to the project can be found under
<https://www.gmbh.wwtf.at/funding/programmes/ict/ICT23-002/>