

**#FreeMahsaAmini on TikTok: A historical and contemporary analysis of  
the mediation of Iranian protests**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the way Iranian protests have been mediated since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. It hereby draws upon media theory in relation to activism, (historical) visual and textual analyses, and perception analysis through video elicitation. The study compared historical protests mediated in newspapers and the recent protests of 2022, focussing particularly on TikTok. In this way, it scrutinises the role of affordances, censorship, and remediation in this process. Data were gathered through various online sources, including a library of historical Iranian newspapers and the TikTok search engine. The results of this study demonstrate how both older and newer media forms use symbolism to frame their narrative and that though newer media forms have been presented as more democratic, both forms have to adhere to certain rules and regulations.

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## 1. Introduction

Iran was shocked by a wave of protests on 16 September 2022. The death of Mahsa Amini, 22, was the catalyst for these demonstrations.<sup>1</sup> Amini had previously been detained by the Iranian Morality Police, a division of the Iranian police force responsible for upholding the laws of the Islamic Regime, which is currently in power in Iran.<sup>2</sup> Amini failed to wear her hijab, a head covering frequently worn by Muslim women.<sup>3</sup> Eyewitness accounts claim that Amini was regularly abused during her imprisonment, which may have killed her. Iran's authorities refuted these reports.<sup>4</sup> Videos of the protests were shared on various social media platforms, particularly on Twitter and TikTok.<sup>5</sup> The latter saw the start of a haircutting trend that supported Iranian demonstrations.<sup>6</sup> This trend originated in Iran and was distributed via TikTok on several Western talk shows, including the Dutch show Op1.<sup>7</sup> This trend was significant for these protests because the Islamic Regime believes that a woman's hair is a symbol of her beauty and should therefore be covered. Protesting women oppose these laws and the Islamic Regime by exposing their hair and cutting it off.<sup>8</sup>

Such demonstrations against the strict regime have a long historical context. The Islamic administration came to power in 1979 after the Iranian Revolution and is still in place today.<sup>9</sup> During the revolution, various fractions representing different ideologies fought each other. These groups comprised secularists, other liberals, and adherents to the new regime, among others.<sup>10</sup> Over time, oppression and violence against groups that opposed the regime steadily increased. Newspapers that published protest articles were shut down and their staff members were prosecuted.<sup>11</sup> In 2022 the regime still acts violently against protesting Iranians.

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<sup>1</sup> Pardis Mahdavi, "Who Are Iran's Morality Police? A Scholar of the Middle East Explains Their History," *The Conversation*, December 8, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/who-are-irans-morality-police-a-scholar-of-the-middle-east-explains-their-history-196023>.

<sup>2</sup> Mahdavi, "Morality Police."

<sup>3</sup> Mahdavi, "Morality Police."

<sup>4</sup> Mahdavi, "Morality Police."

<sup>5</sup> Charissa Cheong, "Muslim Women Are Taking off Their Headscarves and Cutting Their Hair on TikTok to Protest Iran's Hijab Rules Following the Death of 22-Year-Old Mahsa Amini," *Insider*, September 21, 2022, <https://www.insider.com/iranian-women-cut-hair-tiktok-protest-death-mahsa-amini-2022-9>.

<sup>6</sup> Cheong, "Headscarves."

<sup>7</sup> Op1, "Dilan Yeşilgöz, Yesim Candan En Fidan Ekiz Knippen Uit Solidariteit Met Iraanse Vrouwen Hun Haar Op1," YouTube, October 7, 2022, 0:00 to 2:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B28AMoMtdIE>.

<sup>8</sup> Celine Alkhalidi and Nadeen Ebrahim, "Grief, Protest and Power: Why Iranian Women Are Cutting Their Hair," *CNN*, September 28, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/09/28/middleeast/iran-hair-cutting-mime-intl/index.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Ray Takeyh, "Iran at a Crossroads," *Middle East Journal* 57, no. 1 (2003): 43.

<sup>10</sup> Takeyh, "Crossroads," 43.

<sup>11</sup> Takeyh, "Crossroads," 43.

Protesters who were arrested were tortured and their families were intimidated.<sup>12</sup> According to information from the Human Rights Activists News Agency, the regime detained 1044 people in September 2022 alone.<sup>13</sup> The regime has also made an effort to stop the dissemination of footage and news of demonstrations. During the protests, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok were blocked early on. Furthermore, in Iran, the Internet is unavailable for several hours every day.<sup>14</sup>

### **Research questions and objectives**

This thesis presents an analysis of the mediation of Iranian protests from older forms of media to newer forms of media, with a particular focus on TikTok due to its prominence in the recent wave. The thesis will analyse the historical roots of media and censorship in Iran and the regime's struggles with media operating in an increasing international frame. Therefore, the question that guided this thesis is the following. *How have the Iranian uprisings been reported and mediated since 1979, and how does this relate to new media, in particular TikTok?*

Social media use is very common in Iran, especially among young people. Around 80% to 90% of this group possess a cell phone, giving them access to social media sites such as TikTok.<sup>15</sup> However, they must overcome Iranian censorship to gain access. The Iranian government claims that 23.5 million teenagers used VPNs to circumvent the country's Internet censorship in 2015.<sup>16</sup> The Islamic Regime instituted censorship because it believed social media may undermine its authority. Social media has grown in popularity as a tool for providing a counter-narrative to official government claims during revolutions. The Islamic Regime in Iran faces a challenge from social media because it symbolises networks that are difficult for the regime to regulate. Due to modern media outlets such as TikTok, the regime has attempted to prevent the media from reporting on current events or even speaking out. But with media going global, people becoming more tech-savvy, and social media coming along, it is still unclear what, if anything, the Islamic Regime can do to stop the transmission of

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<sup>12</sup> "De protesten in Iran: over de demonstraties die uitgroeiden tot een nationale opstand," Universiteit Utrecht, 25 October, 2022, <https://www.uu.nl/nieuws/de-protesten-in-iran-over-de-demonstraties-die-uitgroeiden-tot-een-nationale-opstand>.

<sup>13</sup> Universiteit Utrecht, "protesten in Iran."

<sup>14</sup> Arash Zad, "When Will Iran's Internet Censorship Collapse?," Slate Magazine, September 29, 2022, <https://slate.com/technology/2022/09/iran-protests-mahsa-amini-internet-censorship.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Mitra Abolfathi et al., "Identification of the Opportunities and Threats of Using Social Media among Iranian Adolescent Girls," *Heliyon* 8, no. 4 (April 2022): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e09224>.

<sup>16</sup> Abolfathi, "Threats of Using Social Media," 1.

information.<sup>17</sup> This is in stark contrast to older media formats, which often function largely within a national framework. Thus, as of the beginning of 2023, the protests are still going strong both online and offline thanks to support from abroad and Iranian opposition.<sup>18</sup>

The thesis focuses on TikTok because the platform is especially significant for the protests in Iran. TikTok was initially released in 2017 and is used mainly for sharing music.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, users can upload videos of themselves having fun by dancing, lip-syncing, or performing other amusing acts. Currently, TikTok is one of the most widely used social media platforms. By 2021, users from all over the world had already downloaded the app more than 1.9 billion times.<sup>20</sup> Accessibility is the primary reason for TikTok's explosive expansion. This expansion coincided with an increase in social movement activities.<sup>21</sup> Users can take part in activist campaigns on TikTok thanks to the platform's culture of creative affordances.<sup>22</sup> These campaigns include projects like the ongoing Black Lives Matter campaign on TikTok during the pandemic or the #StopAsianHate hashtag from about the same period.<sup>23</sup>

To break down the main issue of this thesis, the thesis will be divided into three chapters, each covering one of the sub-questions of this study. These sub-questions include:

- How was activism presented and interpreted in Iranian newspapers during past protests?
- How is activism presented on TikTok during the 2022 protests?
- How is activism on TikTok perceived?

To answer these questions, this thesis employs different complementary methods which are considered to provide detailed insights into the complex dynamics at play. The first chapter will draw on Iranian newspapers, which will be analysed through textual analysis and selected from three time periods. These periods all include significant Iranian protests, with a focus on media restrictions by the regime. The analysis is presented in chronological order, starting from the Iranian Revolution (1979), to the Student Protest (1999), and the Green Movement (2009). Some of the Iranian newspaper publications were taken from the Manchester Library website. This website digitised several Iranian newspapers, mainly related to the revolution.

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<sup>17</sup> "Mass Media in Iran," Wikipedia, April 5, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mass\\_media\\_in\\_Iran](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mass_media_in_Iran).

<sup>18</sup> "Mass Media."

<sup>19</sup> Jin Lee and Crystal Abidin, "Introduction to the Special Issue of 'TikTok and Social Movements,'" *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 1 (January 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157452>.

<sup>20</sup> "Mass Media."

<sup>21</sup> Lee and Abidin, "TikTok and Social Movements."

<sup>22</sup> Lee and Abidin, "TikTok and Social Movements."

<sup>23</sup> Lee and Abidin, "TikTok and Social Movements."

Furthermore, this site provides context about different newspapers and explains their key opinions. The remaining newspapers were selected through Google Lens, which also provided an automated translation of some of the newspaper titles. Other translations were obtained from secondary sources and were done by a professional translator. The reason this thesis only analyses newspaper titles and not full articles is that titles serve to catch readers' eyes. Therefore, it is comparable to hashtags or a TikTok description, giving a fair comparison between the two mediums.

The second chapter draws on TikTok videos, which will be analysed through a narrative analysis, which includes both visual and textual elements selected through a TikTok search. The analysis will be in-depth and focus on both explicit and implicit meanings. For this part, I used my TikTok account to search for videos. Before starting, I made sure to clean up my history, log off my account, and log in again to avoid getting stuck in the TikTok algorithm. This algorithm is based on previous video interactions; thus, I made sure those interactions were all cleared. To be able to conduct an in-depth narrative analysis, I selected only five videos, using the hashtag *#iranprotest*. All videos were selected from the year 2022. The analysis was carried out based on an existing model introduced by Lujain Ammar, Heba Alhamarna, Yara AlWawi, Yara ElSayed, and Hala Harb in their article ‘Analysis of the Representation of the 2019 Lebanese Protests and the 2020 Beirut Explosion on TikTok.’<sup>24</sup> The graph below shows an edited version of their model, which will be used in this thesis.

Frame labels	Attributes and specification
TikTok-context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Creator: What is the video creator's background?</li> <li>- Date: When was the video posted?</li> <li>- Topic: What is the video about in general?</li> <li>- Reach: How many people viewed, liked, commented on, and shared the video?</li> <li>- Hashtags: Which hashtags are used in the video?</li> <li>- Sound: Which role does sound play in the video?</li> </ul>

<sup>24</sup> Lujain Ammar et al., “Analysis of the Representation of the 2019 Lebanese Protests and the 2020 Beirut Explosion on TikTok,” *KIU Interdisciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 1, no. 3 (2020): 53–72.



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Trends: Does the video contain aspects that are part of the hair-cutting trend?</li> <li>- Comments: What comments are people leaving on these videos?</li> </ul>
Narrative analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identifying the characters presented in the video and their position in the events.</li> <li>- Interpreting the captions and context provided in the video.</li> <li>- Examining the actions and images provided in the video.</li> <li>- Expounding what is verbally said in the video regarding the events.</li> <li>- Understanding the influence and agency of the creator on the platform.</li> </ul>
Protest paradigm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identifying which category the representation of the Iranian protesters falls in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Delegitimising the protestors</li> <li>- Marginalising the protestors</li> <li>- Demonising the protestors</li> <li>- Supporting the protestors</li> <li>- Spreading the protestors' message</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Another characteristic of the model was the use of humour in cyberactivism. However, I decided to remove this portion of the model because this concept did not explicitly come to the fore in the TikTok videos I chose.

The perception of the selected videos in chapter three is analysed through two different methods. First, I conducted three interviews with Iranians who reside in the Netherlands. The videos were unstructured and used video elicitation, a process through which interviewers and participants watch the assembled media together. Through this process, interviewers can

record and analyse reactions to a certain video in real-time.<sup>25</sup> In addition, I examined the talk show *Op1*, in which three Dutch public figures, Dilan Yeşilgöz, Yesim Candan, and Fidan Ekiz, cut their hair to support the demonstrations, as well as a video of Dutch lawmaker Sigrid Kaag refusing to do so. Since the interviews are anonymous but Sigrid Kaag, Dilan Yeşilgöz, Yesim Candan, and Fidan Ekiz are public characters, a comparison between the two clips and the interviews provides a nice contrast.

The results of this thesis are intended to shed light on the current situation in Iran and the historical context in which the present protests are born. Furthermore, this thesis aims to contribute to academic research on the connection between activism and (social) media by presenting a new case of activism in Iran in connection with TikTok.

### **Key concepts**

I will now define (re)mediation, cyberactivism, censorship, affordances, and virtual communities, concepts central to this thesis.

#### *(re)mediation*

Mediation can broadly be defined as a social process in which media support the flow of discourses, meanings, and interpretations in societies.<sup>26</sup> This thesis will primarily focus on mediation in relation to activism. Using the media, activists contribute to the flow of media production, circulation, interpretation, and recirculation.<sup>27</sup> This thesis assumes that mediation processes are circular. Activists can adapt media technologies for their purposes, while simultaneously creating new meanings from already existing media products.<sup>28</sup> Thus, a video produced in Iran can circulate on TikTok and from there be transformed to fit an activist narrative. This thesis found that Iranian activists often ascribe symbolic value to something in the mediation process.

While mediation focuses on the flow of discourse through the media, remediation focuses on the visual aspect. Remediation can be defined as the logic by which new media

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<sup>25</sup> S. G. Henry and M. D. Fetters, "Video Elicitation Interviews: A Qualitative Research Method for Investigating Physician-Patient Interactions," *The Annals of Family Medicine* 10, no. 2 (March 1, 2012): 119, <https://doi.org/10.1370/afm.1339>.

<sup>26</sup> Yossi David, "Public Opinion, Media and Activism: The Differentiating Role of Media Use and Perceptions of Public Opinion on Political Behaviour," *Social Movement Studies* 21, no. 3 (January 12, 2021): 337, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2021.1875321>.

<sup>27</sup> David, "Media and Activism," 337.

<sup>28</sup> David, "Media and Activism," 337.

fashion prior media forms.<sup>29</sup> This thesis follows this definition and relates it to the way TikTok refashions newspapers and, more importantly, which aspects they did not refashion and discarded, changing the platform. Through this definition, a comparison between old and new media forms can be easily made.

### *Cyberactivism*

Cyberactivism can be defined as activism that occurs on online platforms.<sup>30</sup> With cyberactivism, it has generally become easier for activists to reach a larger audience. They do not physically have to gather a following, but can send an e-mail or tweet. However, cyberactivism has a dangerous side. The Internet is an anonymous place, therefore it can be hard to discover the true intentions of Internet users. This thesis will investigate cyberactivism on TikTok and question how this cyberactivism is perceived both by public and private figures.

### *Censorship*

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, censorship is the practice of preventing a book, film, work of art, document, or other forms of communication from being seen or made available to the public because it is deemed offensive or harmful or because it contains information that someone wants to keep private, frequently for political reasons.<sup>31</sup> This thesis examines two types of censorship. The first is the censorship practised in Iran under the Islamic Regime. This type of censorship allowed for the closure of multiple periodicals and restricted Iranian access to the Internet.<sup>32</sup> The second is censorship imposed by TikTok itself as a platform. There are various ways to understand this type of restriction. The first is the regulations that the platform must comply with. Users of TikTok must, for instance, abide by an age restriction, per these rules. 'Offensive' videos will also be removed. The definition of the term offensive in the official TikTok rules is ambiguous, giving room for interpretation.<sup>33</sup> The algorithm of the platforms is used in another instance of TikTok censoring. The video that shows on a user's feed is chosen by this algorithm, thereby censoring alternative videos.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> "What Is Remediation?," FutureLearn, n.d., <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/reading-digital/0/steps/16851>.

<sup>30</sup> Margaret Rouse, "What Is Cyberactivism? - Definition from Techopedia," Techopedia.com, January 18, 2017, <https://www.techopedia.com/definition/27973/cyberactivism>.

<sup>31</sup> Cambridge Dictionary, "CENSORSHIP | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary," Cambridge.org, October 23, 2019, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/censorship>.

<sup>32</sup> "Mass Media."

<sup>33</sup> "TikTok |," TikTok, accessed April 15, 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/nl-nl/>.

<sup>34</sup> Christina Newberry, "How the TikTok Algorithm Works in 2020 (and How to Work with It)," Social Media Marketing & Management Dashboard, February 8, 2023, <https://blog.hootsuite.com/tiktok-algorithm/>.

This thesis aims to raise awareness of the fact that although one form of censorship, in the case of the Iranian government, may be more evident and the Internet may be more open, there is still censorship online.

### *Affordances*

The concept of affordances is broad. This thesis defines affordances in relation to TikTok as ‘TikTok affordances’. The reason for this is that affordances are related to specific media, such as Facebook or TikTok. TikTok affordances can be defined as perceived or imagined properties of TikTok, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual, that enable and constrain specific uses of the platform.<sup>35</sup> This thesis will not define affordances by focussing on technological determinism, rather it aims to show that human agency is involved with affordances. For instance, TikTok includes a share button, but sharing a video might mean many things to various people. One may post a video about the protests if they believe it is crucial to spread the word and draw attention to a pressing issue. However, a video can also be shared in a different context, such as to mock another video. Similarly to this, some users may click the "like" button in support of the violence they witness on screen, while other users may do so in support of a message of dissent. Affordances suggest that even persons who appear to be passive media consumers are not completely inert and have their reasons for interacting with media in a particular way. TikTok's censorship and algorithm also play important roles when talking about affordances. Censorship shows that the platform is ruled by someone who decides which videos should be deleted or not, not technological determinism. Furthermore, the algorithm interprets human interaction and acts accordingly, thus humans decide what ends up on their or someone else's TikTok page.

### *Virtual communities*

The definition of virtual communities used in this thesis is that of social groups that form online and frequently have similar political, moral, and social views.<sup>36</sup> The concept of remediation is related to the idea of virtual communities. People may purposely alter a particular media format to suit the preferences of the online community they are a part of.<sup>37</sup> Virtual communities are a relatively new concept. The theory of virtual communities started

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<sup>35</sup> Alexander Ronzhyn, Ana Sofia Cardenal, and Albert Batlle Rubio, “Defining Affordances in Social Media Research: A Literature Review,” *New Media & Society* 0 (November 23, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221135187>.

<sup>36</sup> David Ellis, Rachel Oldridge, and Ana Vasconcelos, “Community and Virtual Community,” in *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*, ed. Blaise Cronin (Information Today, Inc., 2003), 145.

<sup>37</sup> Ellis, Oldridge, and Vasconcelos, “Virtual Community,” 145.

to arise around the same time ‘new’ media became popular. According to this thesis, virtual communities can play a significant role in both online activism that occurs and offline activism that results from this online activism. On TikTok, there are virtual communities that pertain to this idea. A virtual community can be formed if someone creates a video on current events in Iran and as a result of it people begin to discuss the topic, research the matter, and raise awareness of the topic online. Whether these kinds of virtual communities can endure for a longer period is an intriguing subject that still needs to be answered.

## **Historiography**

This thesis is part of a larger historical discussion on the relationship between various media and activism, and how news and activism can spread from one media form to another. This issue has existed since the 1990s, when people first began engaging and creating virtual communities online, even though many social media studies are relatively new.<sup>38</sup> However, this thesis also examines activism in various media, in addition to online activism. It is crucial to establish the current academic dialogue on media activism and the stance taken by the thesis in this discussion.

First, media activism has been studied in a variety of academic fields. Media activism is a popular subject in political theory, social theory, and media theory to name a few. To explore what activism is and the agency that activists have, several models have been proposed. The model for this thesis is John Fiske's concept of semiotic democracy. This model initially appeared in his 1987 book *Television Culture*.<sup>39</sup> The notion of semiotic democracy holds that individuals have the freedom to give certain media the meaning they see fit.<sup>40</sup> Thus, it upholds the notion that humans have agency through freedom, autonomy, and censorship. This may mean one of two things for the Iranian newspapers published during the Islamic Revolution, Student Protest, and Green Movement. First, the protesting newspapers' writers might reject the notion that publications sympathetic to the Islamic Regime simply report the facts. However, they can go even further and publish newspapers with their points of view. According to Fiske's concept, where everyone has their agency, readers of these protest papers can respond by rejecting these ideas as well. This model is even more in line with TikTok as a medium, however. In contrast to newspapers, which can only be read,

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<sup>38</sup> Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner, “New Media and Internet Activism: From the ‘Battle of Seattle’ to Blogging,” *New Media & Society* 6, no. 1 (February 2004): 87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444804039908>.

<sup>39</sup> John Fiske and Henry Jenkins, *Television Culture* (1987; repr., London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> Joshua D. Atkinson, *Journey into Social Activism: Qualitative Approaches*, Project MUSE (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 39.

TikTok's affordances allow everyone to already have agency and freedom in how they engage with the medium. Furthermore, older media mostly operate within a national framework and depend upon financial resources and readership, restrictions which new media do not have. Furthermore, Fiske's paradigm would imply that an online account has the same amount of agency as a real-world activist. When activism transfers online another activist personality is essentially generated here. However, Fiske's model can be questioned here. Online accounts can be created for various reasons. People may not act like themselves when they are online. Do people hold the same agency online as they do offline?

Two authors who do believe that a social media profile is merely an extension of a person's persona in real life are Sally Mcmillan and Jang-Sun Hwang. They introduced the attribute model in their article 'Measures of Perceived Interactivity: An Exploration of the Role of Direction of Communication, User Control, and Time in Shaping Perceptions of Interactivity', published in 2002. This model contends that social media is just a platform for people to elaborate on ideas they have already formed.<sup>41</sup> Thus, someone involved in activism could discover like-minded individuals online and carry on their activism here with them. Therefore, the attribute model falls in line with the concept of mediation.

This demand for online activism can be divided into three categories, according to Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport in their 2011 book, *Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet Age*. First, using social media to inform other activists about offline events, including protests, is known as e-mobilization.<sup>42</sup> The second category is called e-movements, which refers to activism that is done online, including communication, networking, etc.<sup>43</sup> The final category is called e-tactics, which refers to strategies used online to spread knowledge or advance a certain cause.<sup>44</sup> This indicates that these strategies are creating virtual communities that may exist entirely online, following e-movements and e-tactics, or partially offline and partially online, per e-mobilization.

In contrast with McMillan's and Hwang's attribute model, academics have also written about the conjunctive model. This model emphasises that while online activists do have agency, they are constrained by their cultural norms, which determine how they behave around particular media.<sup>45</sup> Pickard, for instance, discovered in his 2006 research of the

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<sup>41</sup> Atkinson, *Social Activism*, 41.

<sup>42</sup> Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport, *Digitally Enabled Social Change : Activism in the Internet Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Mit Press, 2011).

<sup>43</sup> Atkinson, *Social Activism*, 41.

<sup>44</sup> Atkinson, *Social Activism*, 41.

<sup>45</sup> Atkinson, *Social Activism*, 42.

Indymedia Centre (IMC) that the Media Network's decision-making was defined by specific cultural norms, which also had an impact on how activists from the IMC employed various media.<sup>46</sup> This paradigm may be more relevant to the research involving Iranian newspapers in this thesis. The Internet was either non-existent or not as commonly used at this time. Furthermore, due to the internet blackout, outside influences had little impact on Iranians. However, TikTok is a huge, global platform where individuals from various backgrounds can connect. Iranian news sources reported on the protests to Western media. Consequently, a call to action that may have been influenced by certain cultural values got the support of people of many cultural backgrounds. Thus, both models appear to apply to this thesis. Although it accepts that this agency might be influenced by cultural norms, this thesis applies the idea that every activist has agency. By using TikTok and newspapers as case studies, this thesis hopes to advance the academic conversation regarding these approaches. Since all of the researched newspaper publications are Iranian, it would be interesting to determine whether there are any common cultural themes, even if some of the newspapers express opposition to the Iranian regime while others do not. TikTok, however, has a global public, therefore this thesis examines a case of online activism that is both bound by cultural restraints and international exchange.

The aforementioned public often organises themselves into different virtual communities online. Whether virtual communities can be as supportive and close-knit as genuine communities is the main topic of discussion surrounding them. This raises the question of whether, given that they may not be as close-knit as offline groups, virtual communities may be an effective tool for information sharing and mobilising support for activism in the media. Early academic work on virtual communities was mostly favourable. For instance, Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia noted that the majority of academic assessments of interactions online have been extremely positive in their 1999 book chapter *Virtual communities as communities: Net surfers don't ride alone*.<sup>47</sup> These authors claim that the social and supporting nature of online communities attracts a lot of individuals to them. Gender, colour, class, and age would not matter if one wanted to remain anonymous.<sup>48</sup> This thesis does not focus on these four aspects specifically, but does acknowledge that because of anonymity people can experience certain freedom online that they cannot in real life. It is

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<sup>46</sup> Atkinson, *Social Activism*, 42.

<sup>47</sup> Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia, "Virtual Communities as Communities: Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone," in *Communities in Cyberspace*, ed. Peter Kollock and Marc Smith (Routledge, 2002), 170.

<sup>48</sup> Ellis, *Virtual Community*, 148.

intriguing to relate this definition of virtual communities to TikTok in this instance. Although the majority of the information is distributed by non-anonymous parties, the information is consumed by anonymous parties. Therefore, one can contend that the online community is distorted in some way.

This is referenced in the 2018 book *Social Media and New Protest Movements* by Thomas Poell and José van Dijck. According to these authors, cyberactivism frequently has a hierarchical structure, and select well-known social media users who are particularly active on a certain subject may meticulously arrange their cyber activist efforts. Examples of these strategies include boosting particular hashtags or accounts.<sup>49</sup> The values of the Internet and social media, where everything should be collected do not support their belief that social movements should have a leader.<sup>50</sup> So, the question of whether social media are bottom-up and free still stands. Even if members of virtual communities believe that they are free to act however they like, they may still be influenced by online role models.

There might be various forms of virtual communities, according to further study. ‘Intentional Social Action in Virtual Communities’ by Richard Bagozzi and Utpal Dholakia, published in 2002, makes the case that some of these communities are small and may be acquainted with one another offline. There may be much larger communities that will never have an opportunity to interact.<sup>51</sup> This makes it an intriguing topic for this thesis because both possibilities can be merged. Users who post news on TikTok might already be familiar. It is unknown if their followers are acquainted because they are mostly anonymous. They may be divided into smaller groups, some of which will contain people who know each other and others who will not. TikTok's status as a global platform is another intriguing case for this argument.

The ideas mentioned previously of virtual communities, cultural differences, and agency are at the heart of most academic studies on activism and online activism. However, it is crucial to note that academics have consistently drawn attention to the risks associated with cyberactivism throughout the scholarly discussion of the topic. This thesis only analyses the threat posed by cyberactivism concerning the danger that the Islamic Regime's censorship poses for Iranian civilians. However, there are additional risks associated with online activism.

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas Poell and José van Dijck, “Social Media and New Protest Movements,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media*, ed. Thomas Poell, Jean Burgess, and Alice Marwick (London: Sage, 2017), 550.

<sup>50</sup> Poell and van Dijck, “Protest Movements,” 550.

<sup>51</sup> Richard P. Bagozzi and Utpal M. Dholakia, “Intentional Social Action in Virtual Communities,” *Journal of Interactive Marketing* 16, no. 2 (January 2002): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1002/dir.10006>.



Richard Kahn and Thomas Kellner are the first authors to offer insight into this discussion of the potential risks associated with cyberactivism. They contend that many organisations or ideologies can use the Internet to promote their ideals in their 2004 piece “New media and Internet activism: from the "Battle of Seattle" to blogging.”<sup>52</sup> They emphasised that while protests may still take place in the actual world, the media have a significant impact on politics. Since there is little government regulation on the Internet, anyone can create any group, although the formation of virtual communities by activists online can be a terrific tool to accomplish political activist aims.<sup>53</sup> First, this implies that extremists might gather online and create their online groups. Particularly now that these people can locate one another across borders. This sparks a larger discussion regarding the democratisation of the internet. Should everyone have the freedom to express whatever they want on the internet, even if it offends other people? Should there be a restriction to what we may say online? Or does this increase the risk of radicalisation? Second, this proves the danger applications like TikTok pose for national governments. Activists on TikTok can influence other people to stand against the regime in Iran, which not only poses a real threat but is also very difficult to control for the regime.

*The Present and Future of Performing Media Activism* by Neil Alperstein, newly released in 2021, also discusses the challenges of internet protests. Alperstein builds on the concept of online dissent while also introducing performative activism, a relatively recent development in the field of cyberactivism. Performative activism refers to internet advocacy to gain supporters without genuinely supporting a cause.<sup>54</sup> Alperstein points out that this can involve endorsing a certain post without having an interest in the subject by pressing the thumbs-up button.<sup>55</sup> This incorporates the concept of affordances. Performative activism might not always be done deliberately, but due to the various facilities and affordances, individuals unintentionally participate in it.<sup>56</sup>

The fact that cyberactivism has primarily been examined in correspondence to Western cases, black lives matter protests or Trump supporters demonstrations, for example, is another problematic aspect of it. By examining the case of Iran, this thesis aims to advance this. The example of Iran is particularly intriguing because the government imposes such

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<sup>52</sup> Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner, “New Media and Internet Activism: From the ‘Battle of Seattle’ to Blogging,” *New Media & Society* 6, no. 1 (February 2004): 88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444804039908>.

<sup>53</sup> Kahn and Kellner, “Internet Activism,” 88.

<sup>54</sup> Neil Alperstein, “The Present and Future of Performing Media Activism,” in *Performing Media Activism in the Digital Age* (Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2021), 217, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-73804-4\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-73804-4_7).

<sup>55</sup> Alperstein, “Performing Activism,” 217.

<sup>56</sup> Alperstein, “Performing Activism,” 217.

strict control.<sup>57</sup> Newspapers have frequently been shut down during protests in the past. TikTok has been more difficult to eliminate because it is a global platform that makes it easy to disseminate information.

In summary, this thesis makes use of various ideas from discussions in academia about activism and cyberactivism. It adheres to the notion of semiotic democracy proposed by John Fiske in which everyone has agency. According to the conjunctive model, this thesis is based on the idea of TikTok affordances. By linking these affordances to remediation in transnational media like TikTok, as well as Iranian newspapers, this thesis seeks to advance the academic conversation. This thesis also considers the importance of online communities in activism and the potential benefits and drawbacks of large global platforms like TikTok for online communities engaged in activism. Again, these virtual communities are connected with cultural differences. This thesis questions whether, on a medium like TikTok, communities can be formed withstanding cultural differences, or if these communities are temporarily rallying behind a goal, the Iranian protests, and then disappearing, therefore being more connected to performative activism. Lastly, this thesis hopes to add to the non-Western discourse about cyberactivism by researching the case of Iran. Through this research, this thesis hopes to connect activism both to online censorship and to state censorship.

### **Thesis overview**

The following part of the thesis is split into three different chapters related to the sub-questions, each chapter covering a question. The first chapter will contain a historical analysis of the mediation of protest and censorship, zooming in on the involvement of the Islamic regime. The three protests mentioned in the introduction will be analysed separately. Each protest will receive some historical context before the analysis takes place. The second chapter contains an analysis of the mediation of recent protests on social media, with a focus on TikTok. The last chapter looks at the perception of these TikTok videos and investigates whether they lead to the creation of communities and solidarity with the protesters. Throughout the thesis, I hope to emphasise how activism travels from one medium to another and through time as well, and how this is received by both public and private figures.

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<sup>57</sup> "Mass Media."

## 2. Protests in Iran: Media framing in newspapers during the Islamic Revolution, Student Protest, and the Green Movement

### The Islamic Revolution (1979)

In this chapter, I will focus on three uprisings, start each section by providing some historical context, and then analyse the mediation of the uprisings in different Iranian newspapers. The Islamic Regime in Iran rose to power during the Islamic Revolution, also known as the Iranian Revolution, and is still in place today. The regime uses the revolution's events as justification for its claim to govern, executed through symbolic narrative framing. Understanding the events contextualizes the developments in Iran in 2022. The older media, mostly Iranian newspapers, occupied an important role during the revolution. These newspapers were consequently used or banned for both supporting and opposing the new regime.

A 1978 demonstration which took place in Qom is regarded as the start of the revolution. Curiously, the protests in 2022 support Iranian women removing their veils, whereas this demonstration called for the opposite. Tragically, during this protest, several demonstrators were killed as the police shot at the gathered crowd. This prompted 40 days of mourning to honour the deceased demonstrators.<sup>58</sup> This event established the tone of the narrative utilised in pro-regime publications, by referring to the deceased protesters as heroes and martyrs.<sup>59</sup> Thus, ever since 1978, the revolution was symbolically mediated in Iranian newspapers, whether good or bad. Demonstrators from both anti- and pro-regime troops were arrested and accordingly treated as either dissidents or innocent victims. Hence, newspapers from both sides relied on events such as the event in Qom to draw sympathetic readers to their cause.

This demonstrates the situation within Iran, however, these demonstrations were not limited to Iran. The Iranian embassy in East Berlin was stormed that same year by Iranian students who condemned the Iranian government's severe measures against demonstrators.<sup>60</sup> This shows that protests were capable of spreading across borders, even in the 1970s. These students were able to gather enough people in Berlin thanks to the Iranian diaspora.<sup>61</sup> However, there is a difference in transnational activism between older and newer media. In

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<sup>58</sup> Nicholas M. Nikazmerad, "A Chronological Survey of the Iranian Revolution," *Iranian Studies* 13, no. 1/4 (1980): 327–28.

<sup>59</sup> Nikazmerad, "Survey," 328.

<sup>60</sup> Nikazmerad, "Survey," 328.

<sup>61</sup> "Iranian Diaspora," Wikipedia, December 1, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian\\_diaspora](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian_diaspora).

the Berlin case, the protesters were only Iranian.<sup>62</sup> During this time most news was likely gathered from Iranian newspapers or family members and friends in Iran. Consequently, it cannot be stated that activism, in this case, has a complete transnational character. In contrast, in 2022 people of different nationalities become involved in the protests due to the transnational character of newer media forms. However, most 2022 protesters outside of the Internet still have some link to Iran.<sup>63</sup>

In Iran, both pro- and anti-regime protests took place. For instance, a pro-regime protest drew some 300,000 people to Tabriz in 1979. However, a majority of the protests were anti-regime. For example, in 1980 women in Iran protested the regime's strict dress regulations.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, women's autonomy and their choice of attire was and still is a common topic throughout the protests. But while protesters in 2022 mentioned that Iranian women have been demonstrating for a very long time, older Iranian media made little to no mention of women's plights.<sup>65</sup> Women as symbols of bodily autonomy have been mediated in different media forms. However, the bottom-up construction of newer media forms allows more people to share their opinions, including women. Thus, through the affordances awarded by newer media forms, women's problems can come to light.

The new regime did not appear deterred by these protests. In 1980 the Council of the Islamic Revolution was created. This body functioned as a shadow cabinet and was in charge of creating a provincial administration to take the place of the failed new governments.<sup>66</sup> A constituent assembly was also established and charged with writing a new constitution.<sup>67</sup> In addition, the regime demanded the resignation of all parliamentary members, the Regency Council, and all government employees. At the same time, the censorship of Iranian media continued to increase. For example, due to their claims of connections to foreign secret agencies, the staff of the journal *Āyandigān* was detained.<sup>68</sup> The regime not only imposed these censorship rules but also made good use of newspapers. For instance, the publications *Kayhan* and *Ettela'at* were nationalised due to their status as "pillars of the former regime." Thus, the affordances awarded by the regime to these newspapers allowed their continued

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<sup>62</sup> Nikazmerad, "Survey," 328.

<sup>63</sup> Nikazmerad, "Survey," 328.

<sup>64</sup> Nikazmerad, "Chronological Survey," 327–28.

<sup>65</sup> Lucy Sweeney and Nassim Khadem, "'If We Tear This Wall Down, the Islamic Republic Won't Exist': Iranian Protesters Are Uniting against the Regime," *ABC News*, November 18, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-11-19/iran-women-what-makes-this-revolution-different/101563538>.

<sup>66</sup> Sweeney and Khadem, "Uniting."

<sup>67</sup> Sweeney and Khadem, "Uniting."

<sup>68</sup> Sweeney and Khadem, "Uniting."

publication of articles. As a result, the Iranian media was crucial in this ideological conflict.<sup>69</sup>

However, Iranian newspapers were already used to certain censorship rules before the revolution took place.<sup>70</sup> At first, during the events of the revolution, it appeared that newspapers could express themselves more freely, due to the chaotic environment the revolution's events created. Freedom, however, is a dubious concept in this situation. Newspaper activism was frequently backed by anti- or pro-revolution ideas. Therefore, it is not surprising that many newspapers changed their allegiances once the Islamic Regime gained more control. Previously referred to as "anti-national terrorists," protesters were now known as "freedom seekers."<sup>71</sup> As a result, the framing employed by newspapers began to change, which changed how the revolution narrative was presented. In this case, the terminology used to frame a narrative can be seen as remediation. With Iranian newspapers mediating a different ideology, terms related to the previously held ideology had to be remediated. The connection between remediation and censorship is present here as well. It cannot be established with certainty that the newspapers fully embraced the new terminology. Possibly, they were simply adhering to new censorship regulations to keep publishing. As a consequence, the majority of publications were viewed negatively by the Iranian populace during the revolution.<sup>72</sup> It is unknown whether this mistrust grew as the regime began to dominate the media or if it was only directed towards loyalists of the former regime.

After the revolution, the majority of newspapers fired their staff members and deleted old stories to absolve themselves of any association with supporters of the former regime.<sup>73</sup> One example of this is the aforementioned publication, *Kayhan*. The *Kayhan* newspaper, which debuted in 1942, was well-regarded. Mostafa Mesbahzadeh, a former senator, was one of the founders of *Kayhan*. All his possessions were taken after the revolution.<sup>74</sup> This emphasises that newspapers are bound by affordances as well, including production materials, production costs, etc. The closure of the *Kayhan* is hardly surprising given that Mesbahzadeh was a supporter of the government before the Islamic Regime. The following article titles from the *Kayhan* newspapers illustrate how, as a result of the regime's censorship, the terminology and frame connected to the old government were remediated in the newspapers.

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<sup>69</sup> Nikazmerad, "Chronological Survey.", 327-328.

<sup>70</sup> Naiim Badii and L. Erwin Atwood, "How the Tehran Press Responded to the 1979 Iranian Revolution," *Journalism Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (September 1986): 520–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769908606300310>.

<sup>71</sup> Badii and Atwood, "Tehran Press," 518.

<sup>72</sup> Badii and Atwood, "Tehran Press," 518.

<sup>73</sup> Badii and Atwood, "Tehran Press," 518.

<sup>74</sup> Shapour Ghasemi, "Iran Chamber Society: Iranian Media: Kayhan Newspaper," [www.iranchamber.com](http://www.iranchamber.com), 2006, [https://www.iranchamber.com/media/articles/kayhan\\_newspaper.php](https://www.iranchamber.com/media/articles/kayhan_newspaper.php).



Figure 1: Unknown, Political activities of the National Front, Tudeh Party & Islamic Marxists, [https://www.parstimes.com/history/revolution\\_clippings/](https://www.parstimes.com/history/revolution_clippings/).

Figure 1 shows a *Kayhan* article from 1978.<sup>75</sup> In this edition, *Kayhan* transmits to the Iranian people a message from the Shah, the head of the old Iranian government. The Shah is referred to as the "emperor of Iran" in the headline of this article. The article states that "only an emperor can decide the fate of the country" and portrays the Shah in a neutral-positive light.<sup>76</sup> Looking at the terminology used here, *Kayhan* continued to support the Shah's position as ruler of the country at the time. In contrast, Figure 2 depicts a 1979 newspaper, but



Figure 2: Unknown, Rumors of Shah's arrest in Panama, [https://www.parstimes.com/history/revolution\\_clippings/](https://www.parstimes.com/history/revolution_clippings/).

the terminology has changed.<sup>77</sup> The Shah is now referred to as "the traitor king" rather than

<sup>75</sup> "Political Activities of the National Front, Tudeh Party & Islamic Marxists," *Kayhan*, January 25, 1978, [https://www.parstimes.com/history/revolution\\_clippings/](https://www.parstimes.com/history/revolution_clippings/).

<sup>76</sup> "Political Activities."

<sup>77</sup> "Rumors of Shah's Arrest in Panama," *Kayhan*, December 1979, [https://www.parstimes.com/history/revolution\\_clippings/](https://www.parstimes.com/history/revolution_clippings/).

the emperor.<sup>78</sup> This terminology change is highly significant. It symbolises the influence of media on the framing of protests. Thus, the discourse mediated around the Shah has changed due to the remediation of terminology in newspapers.

Intriguingly, research done in Iran discovered that while most of *Kayhan's* reports during the revolution were about the revolution, the general tone in the publications was relatively calm. Approximately 27% of the content of the article was published in this manner.<sup>79</sup> This shows that, while being on the Shah's side, the publication did not explicitly condemn the demonstrators or characterise them as "violent." The terminology used by *Kayhan* changed and became more aggressive with the new censorship regulations imposed by the regime. Stories about justice dominated the newspaper right after the revolution, when the revolutionaries were trying to solidify their authority, amplifying the symbolic use of the revolution in newspapers.<sup>80</sup> This raises the question of whether *Kayhan* was more receptive to the censorship imposed by the regime than by the Shah, or whether *Kayhan* supported the regime's positions more fervently. According to Fiske's semiotic democracy, *Kayhan* must have agreed more with the regime's ideas not to have spoken out. Another explanation is that the regime's punishment for disobeying censorship was worse than the Shah's earlier sentencing. The writers of *Kayhan* would still be able to exercise their right to free speech in this scenario, but they might decide against breaking the law due to concern for their safety.

Another newspaper example is *Āyandigān*, which was one of the most popular publications in Iran before the Islamic Regime rose to power. *Āyandigān* was forbidden once the regime took over. Figure 3 shows a 1979 article by *Āyandigān* that details what happens to those who oppose the regime.<sup>81</sup> An unidentified translator's translation is as follows:

“These days, anyone who objects to the interim government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and seriously criticizes the governance method of the invisible Revolutionary Council and the arbitrary management of its broadcasting agency, and sincerely insists on demonstrating the way out of the chaos, and alerts and warns with sincerity and honesty, which is learnt in the schools of revolution and humanity, instead of receiving acknowledgement and gratitude, will

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<sup>78</sup> “Shah’s Arrest.”

<sup>79</sup> Badii and Atwood, “Tehran Press,” 520–21.

<sup>80</sup> Badii and Atwood, “Tehran Press,” 520–21.

<sup>81</sup> Rasoul Mehraban, “Should Enter the Field with Power of Pen and Sense of Responsibility,” *Āyandigān*, May 31, 1979, [https://www.parstimes.com/history/revolution\\_clippings](https://www.parstimes.com/history/revolution_clippings).



Figure 3: Unknown, Ayandegan newspaper: Constitutionalists were accused of being Babis, [https://www.parstimes.com/history/revolution\\_clippings/](https://www.parstimes.com/history/revolution_clippings/).

be marked as an infidel, disbeliever, hypocrite, SAVAK, anti-revolutionary, opportunist and separatist.”<sup>82</sup>

This article implies to its readers that reasoned opposition to the regime will lead to labels like "infidel" and "hypocrite," questioning the narrative framing imposed by the regime. Thus, not only did the regime enforce terminological framing on pro-regime publications but also on those who opposed the regime. The role older media, in particular newspapers, played during the revolution is very significant, resembling TikTok in the 2022 demonstrations. However, newspapers are simpler for the regime to regulate than TikTok. Although publications such as *Āyandigān* appear to advocate for greater freedom and legitimately criticise the regime, their articles were always written from a Shah-supportive perspective and as a result, were not objective. The Iranian population, who read these newspapers, appeared to be familiar with this idea. Their mistrust of activist press coverage is thus hardly surprising.

It seems that state-imposed censorship had a significant impact on the syntax used in newspapers. Additionally, publications used tragic events as support for their own beliefs. These incidents were changed or made worse to be symbolically used in the narrative of a newspaper. Remediation transformed demonstrators from dissidents to martyrs, changing the narrative. The following section will examine another demonstration, the student protest which took place twenty years after the Islamic revolution, but in which the media continued to play a significant role. For example, the newspapers in this new protest still use the revolution symbolically to enforce their own beliefs.

<sup>82</sup> Mehraban, "Power of Pen,".



## The Student Protest (1999)

The student protest started on the University of Tehran campus and the student residence in 1999. The first demonstrations broke out on campus and at the student housing complex. Protesters protested against the forced closing of the reformist *Salam* newspaper. These protesters were brutally beaten up by the administration in retaliation. In the end, two students lost their lives and numerous others suffered injuries or were taken into custody.<sup>83</sup>

These protests have their origin in the Iranian revolution. Iran's post-revolutionary years were chaotic, partially as a result of the regime's political identity crisis. Should the state be governed by laws created by humans or by religious principles imposed by God? Reformers and traditionalist clerics held opposing positions in this discussion.<sup>84</sup> In addition, a variety of groups protested against the new regime. Through repression and the death of political activists, the regime violently responded to these protests.<sup>85</sup> These demonstrators received support from Mohammed Khatami's (1943–) reform movement. The reform movement promoted democracy, the rule of law, the rights of ethnic minorities, and the opening of the political system. As his popularity grew, Khatami was able to win the 1997 presidential election.<sup>86</sup>

Universities in Iran were particularly affected by the regime's censorship and repression. Political dissent, particularly at universities, was already evident during Khatami's campaign in 1997.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, it is understandable why the 1999 protest was held on university property. Universities were required to uphold specific religious beliefs since the revolution. This included the requirement of religious studies and the segregation of the sexes on campus.<sup>88</sup> The supreme leader's neighbourhood newspaper, *Keyhan*, mentioned that without changing the administration, enforcing laws that support Hezbollah, outlawing organisations that oppose the Islamization of institutions, tightening the screening process for hiring new academics, and dealing with lecturers who are unqualified to teach, they cannot make the universities "Islamic."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Bashir Tofangsazi, "From the Islamic Republic to the Green Movement: Social Movements in Contemporary Iran," *Sociology Compass* 14, no. 1 (December 17, 2019): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12746>.

<sup>84</sup> Daniel Brumberg, "Iran and Democracy," accessed March 28, 2023, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/sites/default/files/Iran%20and%20Democracy.pdf>.

<sup>85</sup> Brumberg, "Democracy."

<sup>86</sup> Jahangir Amuzegar, "Khatami and the Iranian Economy at Mid-Term," *Middle East Journal* 53, no. 4 (1999): 534.

<sup>87</sup> Mehrdad Mashayekhi, "The Revival of the Student Movement in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 15, no. 2 (2001): 283, <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1012977219524>.

<sup>88</sup> Mashayekhi, "Revival," 283.

<sup>89</sup> Reza Razavi, "The Cultural Revolution in Iran, with Close Regard to the Universities, and Its Impact on the Student Movement," *Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no. 1 (2009): 7.

The 1999 student protests were not isolated incidents, and the University of Tehran was not the only university where the disturbance occurred. Together, Khatami's reformist movement and the demand for greater academic freedom from institutions produced the events that led to the student protest.<sup>90</sup> Students not only demonstrated against censorship on their campuses but also against the regime's repression of the media. The reason for this was the closure of the daily newspaper *Salam*. The official ban on 6 July served as this impetus.<sup>91</sup> The publication by *Salam* of a private letter from the Intelligence Ministry's Deputy Saeed Emami to the director of intelligence in the newspaper was the catalyst for this restriction. Emami suggested creating a media censorship organisation and placing limits on the media in this letter.<sup>92</sup> Thus, the protests can be interpreted as pro-media freedom and anti-censorship in general, not just against the forced closure of one newspaper. Newspapers played a significant role in the student uprising, just as they did during the revolution. Not only because the forced closure of a newspaper served as the protest's impetus, but also because opposing publications engaged in a war of words over how to portray the protests. Once again, remediation in correspondence with the framing and terminology had a significant impact on the way the story was told.

The catalyst of the student protest, the newspaper *Salam*, was not only banned but the journal's editor-in-chief, Abbas Abdi, was also detained.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, the special court tried the managing director of the newspaper Hojatoleslam Mohammad Asqar Musavi-Khoeniha in front of the clergy.<sup>94</sup> It is interesting to note that Khoeniha's original punishment included three and a half years in prison as well as a beating. But this sentence was reduced to a fine solely due to his history as a revolutionary during the revolution.<sup>95</sup> Reporting the severe penalty of a former revolutionary would be challenging since Islamic revolutionaries were

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<sup>90</sup> Behrouz Turani, "Remembering the July 1999 Iran Student Movement; a Forgotten Protest?," RFE/RL, July 9, 2020, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/remembering-the-july-1999-iran-student-movement-a-forgotten-protest-/30716685.html>.

<sup>91</sup> Turani, "Remembering."

<sup>92</sup> Turani, "Remembering."

<sup>93</sup> AW Samii, "MERIA: The Contemporary Iranian News Media 1998-1999," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 3, no. 4 (December 1999), [https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/meria/meria99\\_saa01.html](https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/meria/meria99_saa01.html).

<sup>94</sup> Samii, "News Media."

<sup>95</sup> Samii, "News Media."

symbolically hailed as heroes in the media. In this instance, one could argue that the regime’s framing strategy was ineffective.

The article in Figure 4 was written by *Salam* and employs a mostly impartial tone.<sup>96</sup>



Figure 4: Emami, *Salam* newspaper: Information Law has proposed to modify the *Salam* news report from the specialized export exhibition of Press Law.

There are no offensive cartoons or graphic images. The large title in the centre mentions Saeed Emami and his proposed change of press legislation. The article further discusses the decline of press freedom. The impartial tone of the article is interesting. Possibly, *Salam* was trying to circumvent censorship laws by using impartial terminology.

Not only *Salam* but other Khatami-related publications were shut down. Hojatoleslam Abdullah Nuri, for example, the managing editor of *Khordad*, had to appear before the special court to answer for his actions. This case included publishing reports that offended government officials and institutions, spreading false information and waging a propaganda war against the government, disparaging the views of the Father of the Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, publishing reports that were against religious principles, and offending religious sanctuaries.<sup>97</sup> These examples expose the relative ease with which the regime could impose censorship on older media forms. The authors were relatively easy to track down after all. Newspapers, particularly in the way they described protestors, were not only the initial cause but also had a significant impact on the student protests as a whole. The state news source, *El Pais*, reports that approximately 500 students participated in the protests as a brief illustration of this. However, opposition publications claimed that there were 13.000 pupils

<sup>96</sup> Saeed Emami, “Information Law has proposed to modify the *Salam* news report from the specialized export exhibition of Press Law,” *Salam*, July 5, 1999.

<sup>97</sup> Samii, “News Media.”

involved.<sup>98</sup> Once again, terminology and, in this case, numbers are being remediated by opposing sides to enforce their discourse.

It appears that publications were still being used to discredit opponents during these events. When the regime came into power, they could continue to repress publications that supported their rivals or did not follow their norms. Even a publication with a tone as generally impartial as *Salam* was not immune to this. The regime continued to strongly rely on the revolution as a symbol, as evidenced by the leniency with which the *Salam* managing director's punishment was reduced. The struggle over how to frame the protest is still evident in 1999, just as it was in 1979. The existence of alternative newspapers and the ongoing calls for a censorship ban show that the regime cannot completely control the narrative, even though some publications may be attempting to break official censorship regulations. The focus of this chapter's final section will be on protests that took place in 2009. Due to the gradual emergence of the internet in 2009, the Green Movement is an intriguing case. Therefore, with this movement, it is easier to observe how (re)mediation works across various media types.

### **The Green Movement (2009)**

In 2009, the Green Movement established itself as a key component of Iranian protest movements. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was named the winner of the 2009 election in Iran. The opposition candidates, however, Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi, did not recognise these results. Most of their supporters, who were liberal reformists, rushed to the streets in protest.<sup>99</sup> However, in early 2010, the administration put an end to most of these demonstrations. The Green Movement persisted, primarily online, but it would never again be as well-known as it was in 2009.<sup>100</sup>

Beginning in 2011, the Arab Spring resulted in the overthrow of authoritarian rulers in nations like Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Although it was part of the same wave, the Green Movement in Iran in 2009 fell short of its goal of toppling the Islamic Regime.<sup>101</sup> Following Iran's presidential election on June 12, 2009, Green Movement-related protests broke out due to disagreements over the outcome of the vote.<sup>102</sup> The Green Movement was the name given

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<sup>98</sup> RESEARCH DIRECTORATE IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEE BOARD , "IRAN: JULY 1999 DEMONSTRATIONS in TEHRAN," December 2000.

<sup>99</sup> Abbas Milani, "The Green Movement," accessed April 10, 2023, [The Green Movement.pdf \(usip.org\)](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/The%20Green%20Movement.pdf).

<sup>100</sup> Milani, "Green Movement."

<sup>101</sup> Nikita Filin, "The Green Movement in Iran: 2009–2010," in *Handbook of Revolutions in the 21st Century*, ed. Jack A. Goldstone, Leonid Grinin, and Andrey Korotayev (Springer Cham, 2022), 571,

[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-86468-2\\_22](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-86468-2_22).

<sup>102</sup> Filin, "Green Movement," 571.

to the demonstrations since it reflected the official colour of Mousavi's campaign.<sup>103</sup> The demonstration quickly expanded to other important Iranian cities, although Tehran was the location where it persisted the longest. Demonstrators demanded reform and liberalisation of the political system, as they had in previous demonstrations.<sup>104</sup>

The Green Movement is distinct from past movements that have emerged in Iran and other Middle Eastern countries in many ways. This is because the Green Movement was driven by common young adults and lacked a clear leader. It was also a decentralised and networked movement, which made it more difficult to track.<sup>105</sup> "People are not following us, but we are following them," former president Khatami explains.<sup>106</sup> Compared to other movements around the world, the Green Movement made much more extensive use of the Internet and other cutting-edge technologies.<sup>107</sup> Through e-mobilization people could call online for offline protests. Additionally, e-movements started to form online to keep the protests alive. As a result, the Green Movement has also been referred to as the "Twitter revolution" and "Internet-orientated revolution".<sup>108</sup> The movement's decentralisation can also be attributed to the Internet's significantly increased influence. Online, it appeared as though a sizable virtual community was developing without a designated leader. This made it particularly difficult for the regime to suppress this movement. The administration switched from newspaper censorship to banning websites and the Internet.<sup>109</sup>

The efforts of the Green Movement were widely denigrated by the regime, which also served to foster increased hostility towards the protesters.<sup>110</sup> For instance, Newspaper *Kayhan* demonised Green Movement demonstrators. Demonstrators were mockingly referred to as "dirt and dust." Therefore, once again, terminological framing seems to be the regime's greatest weapon when it comes to communicating its narrative. The government's willingness to use force against the demonstrators was also communicated by this newspaper.

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<sup>103</sup> Filin, "Green Movement," 571.

<sup>104</sup> Filin, "Green Movement," 571.

<sup>105</sup> Saeid Golkar, "Liberation or Suppression Technologies? The Internet, the Green Movement and the Regime in Iran," *International Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society* 9, no. 1 (2011): 54-55.

<sup>106</sup> Golkar, "Liberation," 54-55.

<sup>107</sup> Golkar, "Liberation," 54-55.

<sup>108</sup> Golkar, "Liberation," 54-55.

<sup>109</sup> Vivian Yee, "Despite Iran's Efforts to Block Internet, Technology Has Helped Fuel Outrage," *The New York Times*, September 29, 2022, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/29/world/middleeast/iran-internet-censorship.html>.

<sup>110</sup> Olesya Venger, "The Strategic Use of News Coverage of the 2009 'Green Movement' in the US and Iranian Newspapers as Social Drama," *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research* 9, no. 1 (2016): 67.

‘[t]he strong recommendation of the Supreme Leader: Mr Mousavi! Draw a clear line between you and the rioters.’<sup>111</sup>

Thus, the regime attempted to control the narrative that appeared in the newspapers even though they were unable to put a stop to the forming of e-movements. This also meant that Iranians without internet access, such as the elderly, were still limited to reading tightly restricted state newspapers. An active strategy to circumvent government censorship can be seen in the shift by activists to the Internet. It can also be viewed as a natural phenomenon, however. There are simply more people online as the Internet gains popularity. The formation of activist virtual communities is a logical outcome of this migration to the Internet.

State publications attempted to dominate the narrative by portraying the government as the leader of a family that is concerned about its members' progeny.<sup>112</sup> Despite including violent remarks against demonstrators, they insisted that they were not guilty to the public. The term "conscientious public" refers to those who support the government.<sup>113</sup> For example, the *Etemaad* newspaper mentions: ‘[a]nyone who takes up arms to fight with the people ... [is] worthy of execution ...’ but ‘Tehran police authority ensures that ordinary people were not arrested during the protests.’<sup>114</sup>

The fact that there was a movement of activism from older media forms to newer media forms during the protests of the Green Movement makes it unique. Newspaper activism gradually began to transition to cyberactivism. The protests were sustained by the emergence of e-movements and the forming of virtual communities. The regime found it difficult to suppress online activity because of the decentralised nature of the e-movements and virtual communities that were growing there. As a result, Iranian newspapers were subjected to even stricter censorship and attempts by the authorities to shape public opinion.

It is interesting to note that, despite its diminished influence, the Green Movement is still active online. This is demonstrated by the regime’s weariness about the possible survival of the Green Movement, and the possibility in which the movement would gain a larger following.<sup>115</sup> To counteract this, the regime tries to control the activities of the Iranian people on the Internet. This clearly illustrates the link between cyberactivism and (re)mediation as new media refashion older media. It seems that decentralised platforms enabled by social

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<sup>111</sup> Venger, "News Coverage," 68.

<sup>112</sup> Venger, "News Coverage," 71-72.

<sup>113</sup> Venger, "News Coverage," 71-72.

<sup>114</sup> Venger, "News Coverage," 71-72.

<sup>115</sup> Erdal Bayar, "The rise and fall of a social movement in Iran: The Iranian Green Movement," no.8: 25. 10.52477/sls.2023.13.

media and the Internet make suitable platforms for advocacy and resistance under authoritarian regimes. There are numerous ways in which people surpass the limitations of the Islamic Regime's Internet.<sup>116</sup> As such, censorship is much less prominent online than in older media such as the national press. However, the importance of newspapers did not go away. People who still do not have access to the Internet might rely solely on newspapers for their information. In addition, newspapers are still widely considered trustworthy sources by many. It is evident from looking at these historical Iranian protests and how these have been mediated that newspapers may be a useful tool in the activism struggle. Both pro- and anti-regime parties will attempt to steer the narrative through specific terminology and symbolism. A newspaper may even change its terminology as a result of censorship and "switch sides" by doing so. It is also intriguing that the Islamic Regime continues to utilise the Islamic revolution as a heroic symbol, with far-reaching ramifications because it depends so largely on it for its legitimacy.

The next chapter will dive into the analysis of the 2022 Iranian protests on social media, focusing particularly on TikTok as a form of remediation. Compared to the first chapter, the social and political context in Iran has changed. Today, there are many more choices for online activism. Furthermore, the protests have generated transnational interest by the way they are increasingly spread, shared, and circulated online. Although this chapter demonstrated that even the 1979 Islamic Revolution had some international components, such observations pale in comparison to the recent uprisings in 2022. One could even argue that those inside and outside Iran are fuelling these new protests. As a result, I examine newer media forms - TikTok - in relation to the (re)mediation of activism in the following chapter.

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<sup>116</sup> "Mass Media."

### **3. Analysing the protests: The transmission of TikTok videos on the Iranian protests.**

As noted in the introduction, TikTok has played a big role in the 2022 protests. When it comes to sharing information, the forum is quite popular, which triggered the beginning of the haircutting trend on this platform. As a result, this chapter will investigate the (re)mediation of the 2022 demonstrations via the Internet platform. The narrative analysis of a few TikTok videos on Iranian protests in 2022 is found in the following section. The analysis explores how demonstrators construct their narrative with imagery and symbolism mostly associated with women, in contrast to the Islamic Regime, which frames its narrative with symbols from the Islamic Revolution. The analysis will look for repeating themes in the selected videos from around the world.

Iranian TikTok users have been using the platform to share videos in 2022 despite the censorship imposed by the regime. TikTok's organisational structure has been quite beneficial in this regard. TikTok enables the sharing, joining together, and duetting of videos by various users.<sup>117</sup> This makes it difficult to pinpoint the precise origin of a video. By using a VPN to broadcast a video, Iranian users rely on this tactic, the video is subsequently shared and duetted by people around the world.<sup>118</sup> As a result, TikTok viewers around the world are exposed to a variety of videos from many cultures and nations, including Iran. Interestingly, the majority of TikTok users, about 57%, identify as a woman.<sup>119</sup> This could impact which audience TikTok videos are generally catered for. However, while newer media forms appear to have a bottom-up construction with no censorship, in the case of TikTok the algorithm and rules and regulations can be seen as a form of censorship. The people behind the platform decide which videos can be shown and which cannot, and also which videos eventually end up on users' feeds.

#### **#iranprotest**

The five TikTok videos with the hashtag #iranprotest that received the most likes will be the subject of visual and textual study in this analysis. The model developed by Ammar, Alharmana, AlWawi, ElSayed, and Harb will be used here. This model examines a video

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<sup>117</sup> Whitney Shylee Mae, "How Iranian Protesters Are Using TikTok to Avoid Government Censors," fastcompany, December 14, 2022, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90824468/iranian-protesters-tiktok-avoid-government-censors>.

<sup>118</sup> Mae, "Government Censors."

<sup>119</sup> L. Ceci, "Global TikTok User Age and Gender Distribution 2022," Statista, February 6, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1299771/tiktok-global-user-age-distribution/>.



creator's background, the TikTok video's aesthetic style, the text that is included in the clip, and the framing of the protesters. The analysis will be broken down into five parts for each of the videos, except for the second video analysis, which will have two videos. This is because *Goldie Ghamari*, one of the accounts that submitted a video, was deleted. Unknown factors may have contributed to the account and video being deleted. Perhaps the video went against TikTok's rules by being too explicit. Another possibility is that *Goldie Ghamari*, the account's creator, a well-known individual in Canada, either did not want to continue to be affiliated with this subject or was instructed not to. The video's replacement was the video that garnered the most likes after the previously selected five videos.

### **Video #1**

On 26 September 2022, early on in the protest, the user *Mershool* posted the first video online. The Canadian user *Mershool* is a photographer and videographer.<sup>120</sup> They have a quite sizable 99.9k fan base. A total of 3.5 million people liked the video, followed by 31.7k comments, 44.6k shares, and 175.3k saves.<sup>121</sup> The amount of viewers who enjoyed *Mershool's* video is far larger than their fan base. Therefore, this video reached a large audience. According to the statistics, numerous viewers engaged with the video by watching and commenting on it.

Images from a protest in Vancouver, Canada, are shown in the video. Men are completely absent, with the protesting women taking centre stage. Most women are cutting their hair, and many of them are distressed.<sup>122</sup> Although it is not stated whether *Mershool* took these pictures, there is a good likelihood that they did. *Mershool* plays into the viral trend of haircutting that surrounds these protests by emphasising haircutting by including a close-up shot of cut-off hair in someone's palm.<sup>123</sup> This is the first instance on TikTok in which activists used women and their independence as a symbol. Thus, through visual remediation, *Mershool* mediates women and Mahsa Amini as symbols for the protests. Contrasting not only the framing done by the regime in Iran, which focuses mostly on the revolution, but also the framing done in older Iranian media forms in general. As observed from the newspapers, women did not seem to play an important role in the symbolism used here by activists, though the core of activism was the same idea: freedom. On TikTok, Amini's fight for bodily

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<sup>120</sup> Mershool, "I Wanna Fight..." *TikTok*, September 26, 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@mershool/video/7147578096214985989>.

<sup>121</sup> Mershool, "Fight."

<sup>122</sup> Mershool, "Fight."

<sup>123</sup> Mershool, "Fight."

autonomy and eventual demise have been engineered by cutting off hair in favour of that autonomy. Some women wearing t-shirts with Mahsa Amini's face on them, as seen in Figure 4, lend credence to this symbolism.<sup>124</sup> This conveys a clear message about *Mershool's* viewpoint on what these protests ought to be about. These three subjects, women, haircutting, and Mahsa Amini, are the three main focuses of the video. In their TikTok, *Mershool* thus establishes a distinct narrative. The video does this primarily through images, but it also uses



Figure 5: *Mershool*, protesting woman, TikTok.

text to reinforce those images.

The caption, hashtags, and comments in this video all include pertinent text. I want to fight, says the video caption, which is consistent with the audio utilised in the clip.<sup>125</sup> The music playing in the background is *Another Love*, sung by Tom Odell. The fact that this song was featured in videos concerning the Ukraine War leads to its classification as a protest song. Since Odell dedicated this song to Iranian women during one of his concerts, it is particularly unforgettable for many Iranian protesters.<sup>126</sup> This symbolises again the transnational character of the 2022 protests and how activism travels through the media. So, through remediation, this song, which was associated with the Iranian uprisings, also became a symbol. People will begin to associate the song with the protests if it is used in conjunction with pictures of them. *Mershool* uses four hashtags to communicate the content of the video to a global audience, supporting the caption with additional text. Mahsa Amini appears in two of the hashtags,

<sup>124</sup> Sophie Koole, *Protesting woman*, March 16, 2023, Screenshot, TikTok.

<sup>125</sup> *Mershool*, "Fight."

<sup>126</sup> Kevin Tschierse, "Tom Odell's 'Another Love' Reenters Charts as Protest Song – DW – 11/29/2022," *dw.com*, November 29, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/tom-odells-another-love-reenters-charts-as-protest-song/a-63922553>.

emphasising her symbolism once more.<sup>127</sup> Vancouver is included in one of the hashtags, possibly to inform local activists. Most of the comments express support for the female actors in the video. Even those not Iranian seem to connect with Mershool's message. As one user said, "As a mohawk women this is very powerful movement as hair is vary sacratied to our culture, I feel the pain and the power behind it."<sup>128</sup>

*Mershool* does not reside in Iran; thus it appears that the Iranian symbolism associated with the protests is transnational. Perhaps because everyone can support the cause of women's bodily autonomy. This is also supported by the way TikTok allows for a broad audience reach. Certain components that will appeal to a global audience will undoubtedly help. For example, the English-language lyrics of the well-known song Another Love make it simpler for many people to understand what is being said. The video presents a fairly good impression of the demonstrators. The protesters are portrayed as standing up for a just cause through the use of symbols. The purpose of the video is obviously to touch the hearts through the use of moving music and visuals.

In the case of this video, women and Mahsa Amini are visually framed as symbols of the protests. Through TikTok affordances, Mershool can create visually appealing imagery of these symbols, supported by the music and the text. Looking at user engagement, it appears that through remediation specifically designed for TikTok the message Iranians want to put out into the world can travel to newer media platforms and reach a global audience.

## **Video #2**

The second video's opening segment was uploaded by the user ID *Goldie Ghamari*, a Canadian woman who holds public office. The video, which was posted on November 20, 2022, has 3.5 million likes, 90.9 thousand comments, 132.5 thousand shares, and 314.5 thousand saves.<sup>129</sup> Thus, user interaction with this video is even more pronounced than that with the last one. This video has a less appealing aesthetic. There are only words on a dark screen; there are no graphics. As a result, the effect is more dramatic. The sounds of gunfire accompany the text of the film that describes what is happening to Iranian demonstrators.<sup>130</sup> It appears that these sounds are real and are being recorded by someone in Iran. However, it is not certain if that is the case. Together, the two give a shocking image. The caption of the video reads Part 17. Being alive in Iran is already a death sentence. The terrorist Islamic

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<sup>127</sup> Mershool, "Fight."

<sup>128</sup> Mershool, "Fight."

<sup>129</sup> Goldie Ghamari, "Being Alive in Iran is a Death Sentence," *TikTok*, November 20, 2022.

<sup>130</sup> Ghamari, "Death Sentence."

Regime in Iran can execute people without first giving them a formal death sentence. Part 17 says that *Goldie Ghamari* covers the situation in Iran more frequently.<sup>131</sup> The information shown in the video is supported and explained by the caption.

The reason the video was restricted by TikTok is what makes it more intriguing. So why was *Goldie Ghamari's* entire account deleted specifically? There might be several causes behind this. First, the video may have been reported. People can report a video on TikTok thanks to its features without having to explain. They have some reasons why the video should be erased, but they are also free to give any old excuse. As a result, it is unclear to which agency a video gets reported. Did the gunshots unnerve individuals, or did they object to *Goldie Ghamari* covering the story? In this case, the affordances of TikTok can be related to TikTok censorship. Thus, the audience can partly decide what content should be censored, though the final decision lies with the people behind the platform. This begs the question of whether newer online media forms are more free than older traditional media forms. If people can censor what they do not agree with, is that not the same as censoring done by the regime in Iran? Second, *Goldie Ghamari* had the option of closing her account on her own. Her profile indicates that she is a well-known political figure. Perhaps she had changed her mind or been instructed not to report on the issue.

The video that was supposed to replace the one shared by *Goldie Ghamari* was uploaded on 31 October 2022, by the account *ac2ality*. 1.1 million people have liked, commented on, shared and saved this video.<sup>132</sup> Therefore, user engagement is lower than for the other videos that were evaluated. With 4.3 million followers, this Spanish news account is very active. Because it only received 1.1 million views, it appears that this specific video is not extremely well-liked.<sup>133</sup> Maybe the majority of people that follow this account are less frequent TikTok users. Although the video is highly grainy and challenging to watch, it appears to show some Iranian students attempting to smash down a door. The story being told by the images is not very clear. Why are these college students attempting to break a door? Where exactly is this happening? To better understand the offered tale, the included caption and hashtags have to be read.

*Siguen las protestas en Irán* is the caption, which translates to "protests continue in Iran." The text provides background information for the video but does not clearly explain

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<sup>131</sup> Ghamari, "Death Sentence."

<sup>132</sup> Ac2ality, "Siguen Las Protestas En Irán," TikTok, October 31, 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@ac2ality/video/7160690900253953323>.

<sup>133</sup> Ac2ality, "Las Protestas."

what is happening.<sup>134</sup> The use of Spanish is intriguing. This suggests that the video is intended for a Spanish-speaking audience, further strengthening the global perception that these Iranian protest videos generate on TikTok. Additionally, there is text above the pictures. Students at an Iranian university tear down the wall that separates men and women in their dining room, according to the translated text accompanying the video.<sup>135</sup> As a result, this text provides some context for the photographs. However, there are still some unanswered questions. Why are these students attempting to breach this barrier? Do they support gender equality themselves, or are they anti-protesters looking to hurt the ladies on the opposing side?

The poor quality of the footage makes it difficult to determine to what category the demonstrators belong. As a result, viewers of the video have many different ways to engage with it and interpret it. The use of symbolism and narrative storytelling in this video is certainly less significant than in the previous one. In this instance, the video was improperly remediated to fit the platform. More context is required for the average viewer to understand the videos on TikTok. The risk associated with cyberactivism as described by Kahn and Kellner can be related to this video. When anyone can post what they want on the internet, news regarding current events can be murky and provide a viewing audience with erroneous information.

Thus this second video shows what can happen when remediation goes wrong, for lack of a better term. The lack of clarity presented in the video shows that this news message was not adequately adapted to the TikTok environment, leaving the audience in the dark about the message that was supposed to be portrayed. This happening in older media forms is less likely, since there is no use of video materials here. People might interpret a picture wrong, but most of the time the text accompanying the picture explains what is happening. However, the connection between older and newer media forms in the spread of misinformation is the same. It is just as easy to use a wrong picture in a newspaper to frame a certain narrative as it is to use a wrong video on TikTok.

### **Video #3**

The third video is uploaded by user *Kimito*, a 21-year-old Dutch woman who identifies as a journalist. The protests on TikTok are international because we are witnessing yet another nation here. This video was published on October 31, 2022. 2.8 million people liked this video, which is a significant number for someone located in the Netherlands. More than 3382

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<sup>134</sup> Ac2ality, "Las Protestas."

<sup>135</sup> Ac2ality, "Las Protestas."

comments, 9569 shares, and 123k saves were made on the video.<sup>136</sup> This indicates that user engagement here is minimal when looking at likes, shares, and saves.

The person featured in the video, *Kimito*, reveals several portraits taken of her while



Figure 7: *Kimito*, Self-portrait, TikTok

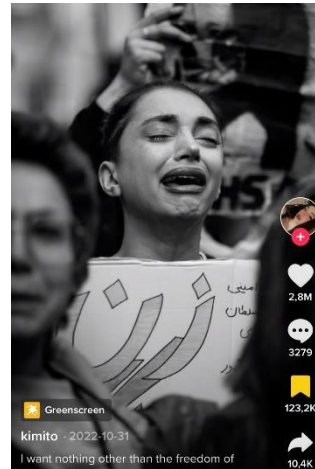


Figure 6: *Kimito*, Photograph, TikTok

participating in a demonstration for Iran. A moving image of *Kimito* and the phrase, ‘A photographer contacted me and told me he took pictures of me during the Iran protest’, as shown in Figure 7, open the video.<sup>137</sup> This segment of the video was colour recorded, the second part with the photographs is portrayed in black-and-white. The photographs in question are then shown in the video. Figure 6 shows these black-and-white pictures.<sup>138</sup> It is unknown whether these pictures were converted to black-and-white by the photographer or by *Kimito* herself. If the latter is true, she might be trying to draw attention to the dejection and misery depicted in the images, or perhaps the photographer also intended for that to be the case. The images show *Kimito* sobbing while carrying a placard in either Arabic or Persian. She is the main subject of attention because the background subjects are only faintly visible.<sup>139</sup> This accentuates the emphasis on women once more. There are three pictures in the collection that show the sentiment. Thus, the symbolism of women's bodily autonomy is still present in this video, but unlike the earlier one, the user herself is given more attention as a symbol rather than Mahsa Amini. As a result, it is possible to see how symbolism has been remediated from the real Mahsa Amini to Mahsa Amini as a symbol in the media and on TikTok, to users who identify with Mahsa Amini and utilise themselves as a symbol.

I want nothing more than the freedom of my country, says the title of the film. Please

<sup>136</sup> *Kimito*, “I Want Nothing Other than the Freedom of My Country,” TikTok, October 31, 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@kymyatehrani/video/7160713605757930758>.

<sup>137</sup> Sophie Koole, *Kimito*, March 16, 2023, Screenshot, TikTok.

<sup>138</sup> Koole, *Kimito*.

<sup>139</sup> Koole, *Kimito*.

speak up for, I beg you. The hashtags in the caption are then used to complete it. #iran #mahsaamaini #fyp #foryoupage #xyzbca and other related hashtags were used.<sup>140</sup> It is interesting to note that only two of these hashtags are associated with the protests in Iran. This could be a successful strategy to attract attention because these hashtags are frequently used in response to protests. The final hashtag, xyzbca, may seem arbitrary, but it is one that people frequently use when they want their video to gain popularity, particularly when used in conjunction with the hashtag fyp. The hashtags appear to indicate that *Kimito* wants the video to appear on users' for you pages. But given that Iran does not have many hashtags, does she want the message to go out there, or is it more about getting her photographs on other people's pages? If this is the case, performative activism might be appropriate here, albeit it would be incorrect to label it that because we do not know *Kimito's* agency.

Since *Kimito* personally participated in the protest, it is clear that the protesters are depicted positively. *Kimito* emphasises the emotional component of protesting, similar to the first video. defending the notion that this is a serious protest and that the current status is detrimental to ordinary people. *Kimito* amplifies her position on the subject by making herself the main subject of the video. Through TikTok affordances, *Kimito* has managed to remediate herself as a symbol in correlation to the symbolism represented by Mahsa Amini.

#### **Video #4**

User *Ariana Jasmine* posted the fourth video. This user identifies as an activist and an Iranian woman who resides in the United States and streams on Twitch. This video was uploaded by her on October 17, 2022. A little fewer than the other videos mentioned, the video received 1.6 million likes. The number of likes indicates a slightly higher level of user interaction. 24.1K shares, 56.9K saves and 5153 comments were made in this video.<sup>141</sup> In the corner of the video, there is a tiny version of the news that *Ariana Jasmine* wants to share. In this manner, visitors may view both her and the educational video. If she is a Twitch streamer with a following, this makes sense. If she also stays in the frame, more people will know her and may watch the video longer. This is an illustration of remediation done properly. *Ariana Jasmine* is delivering news, but since most of her TikTok followers are more familiar with her

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<sup>140</sup> Kimito, "Freedom,".

<sup>141</sup> Ariana Jasmine, "Your Daily News Update on Iran," TikTok, October 17, 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@arianajasmine/video/7155572924122991918>.

face, she also includes that face in the news narrative. She does not speak; instead, she simply crosses her arms and looks intently at the camera.<sup>142</sup> This suggests that she believes that we should view this video and take this news seriously. As a result, *Ariana Jasmine* uses her face to tell this story. A female athlete can be seen in the short film in the corner, which also has an Arabic or Persian translation. The video itself does not visually convey much news to viewers outside of the country. To clarify the issue, the text is included in the video.

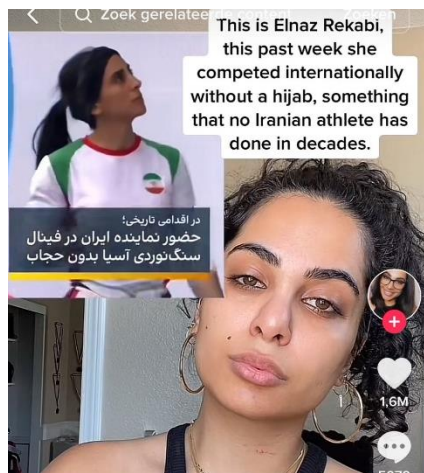


Figure 9: Ariana Jasmine, News, TikTok

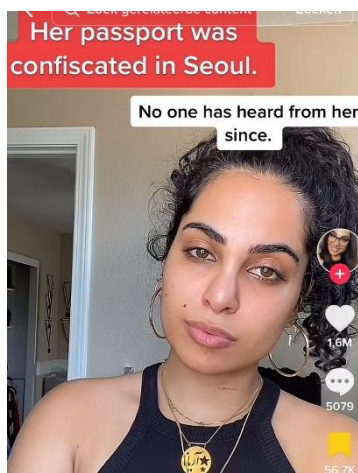


Figure 8: Ariana Jasmine, News, TikTok

The text immediately adjacent to the brief video grabs the viewer's attention first, as seen in Figure 9.<sup>143</sup> What we can see on the screen has more context thanks to this writing. This is Elnaz Rekabi, and this past week she competed internationally without a hijab, something no Iranian athlete has done in decades, according to the writing, which is written in black on a white background. The video and text are replaced by text after you have finished reading this section. The passage is then divided into two separate sentences. Figure 8 illustrates this by showing a portion of the sentence in red as if issuing a warning, and another portion on a white background.<sup>144</sup> Her passport was seized in Seoul, according to the red portion, and no one has heard from her since, according to the white portion.<sup>145</sup> The contrast between red and white implies both simple news reporting and a call for action to do something about her passport confiscation. As a result, it seems that *Ariana Jasmine* adopts a textual narrative technique in her video that is also used in newspapers. bold titles to catch the attention of the audience. Thus, this user has translated newspaper narrative strategies into TikTok through the application of remediation.

<sup>142</sup> Jasmine, "Update."

<sup>143</sup> Sophie Koole, *Ariana Jasmine*, March 16, 2023, Screenshot, TikTok.

<sup>144</sup> Koole, *Ariana*.

<sup>145</sup> Koole, *Ariana*.



Deel 111: Your daily news update on Iran is the description that goes with the image. It is possible that TikTok itself created this instalment of a series given that the first section is in Dutch.<sup>146</sup> This section reads in Dutch for me because my account settings are Dutch. This brings to mind TikTok's global components. A caption on a scenario in Iran that is partially in English and partially in Dutch. According to the description, *Ariana Jasmine* has previously written extensively on the subject. The hashtags #iranrevolution #iran #iran #mahsaamini #mahsa\_aminini #iranprotests #theprogressivebrat are included in the caption.<sup>147</sup> The hashtags in the fourth video appear to be more focused on the news itself rather than landing on the people's for you page, in contrast to the hashtags in the third video. Her progressive bat Twitch channel looks to be self-promoted in the final hashtag, however. The usage of symbols differs from the third video in another way. In both situations, the user is emphasised, perhaps more so in the third example than in the fourth. *Ariana Jasmine*, however, seems to assume a smaller position and prefers to emphasise the news she gives as being more significant than *Kimito*, who transforms herself into a symbol.

This video discusses protesting once more but does it distinctively. In this case, the protester is a single female athlete, not a group of demonstrators. So a woman is being utilized as a symbol and an example once again. Although it seems different, *Ariana Jasmine* also aims to evoke emotions in the listeners. *Ariana Jasmine* warns about the dangers for protesters in Iran, in contrast to the first and third videos, which focus more on the feelings that accompany protesting. This warning appears to be backed up by the user's underlying rage.

## **Video #5**

The account *ADA* posted the most recent video. Although we do not know much about the person who manages this account, we know that she is female. This indicates that almost all individuals who posted videos of Iranian protests identified as women. As a result, these protests are once again focused on women. This relates to the idea of newer media forms being more bottom-up in nature, allowing anyone on the platform. Although older media forms in Iran never focused much on women, possibly because most of the people working in the newspapers were men, with newer media forms this is possible. The video received 1.5

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<sup>146</sup> Jasmine, "Update."

<sup>147</sup> Jasmine, "Update."

million likes and has user participation similar to the fourth video.

Figure 10 depicts user *ADA* in a moving image posing in front of a still photograph of Ariana Grande.<sup>148</sup> Her facial expression conveys astonishment and suggests that she has news

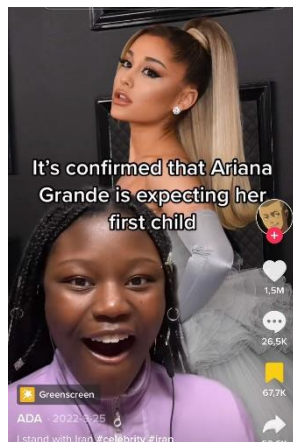


Figure 10: *ADA*, Ariana Grande, TikTok

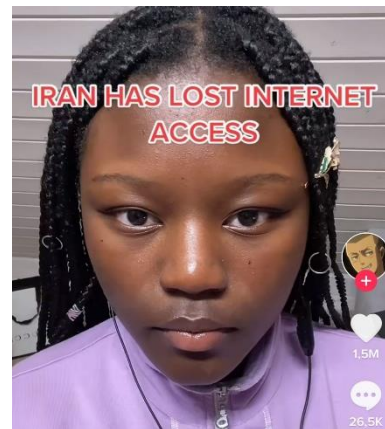


Figure 11: *ADA*, Iran News, TikTok

to give about Ariana Grande.<sup>149</sup> Similar to the fourth video, this user appears to create a narrative using her face and other photos. Then, as seen in Figure 11, the image of Ariana Grande vanishes and *ADA* fixes her serious gaze squarely on the camera.<sup>150</sup> The accompanying text is as important, but these graphics might help the visitor get a feel for what to expect. It has been verified that Ariana Grande is expecting her first child, the language in the first segment of the video reads. Iran has lost Internet access, the text reads after the image of Ariana Grande fades away and switches to red to change the subject.<sup>151</sup> Combining the language and the visuals, it seems as though *ADA* is attempting to draw in pop culture enthusiasts by providing them with information that they should be interested in rather than the birth of Ariana Grande's child. Thus, it also qualifies as a social commentary. Celebrities tend to pique people's curiosity more than real-world issues do. *ADA* appears to have mastered the technique of presenting news about important topics in a TikTok format.

The video caption backs up *ADA*'s mission. I support Iran, as it simply states.<sup>152</sup> The hashtags used are consistent with both mainstream culture and serious news. The hashtags #iran #protests #help #womensright are associated with important news. Popular culture hashtags include #celebrity, #tea, #arianagrande, and #famous.<sup>153</sup> Many responses appear to

<sup>148</sup> Sophie Koole, *ADA*, March 16, 2023, Screenshot, TikTok.

<sup>149</sup> Koole, *ADA*.

<sup>150</sup> Koole, *ADA*.

<sup>151</sup> Koole, *ADA*.

<sup>152</sup> *ADA*, "Iran."

<sup>153</sup> *ADA*, "Iran."

favour Iran and the message that *ADA* presents. Some commentators seem perplexed, which is to be expected from those who are unfamiliar with this subject. However, *ADA* does not comment very often and does not explain what she means. Thus TikTok affordances play a role in a video transferring information well. There is room for additional commentary to explain a video, but if a user decides not to use this room, the video might fall flat. Some of the comments are more critical, suggesting that people are still more interested in news about Ariana Grande. Like the commenter *Pastel*, who asks: Is Ari pregnant or not?<sup>154</sup> The question that remains is whether videos like this can pique the curiosity of viewers who are otherwise uninterested in the subject.

So, even though the last video appears to be the most appropriate for the TikTok platform, it is debatable whether it is the ideal method for disseminating important news like this. A larger audience could be reached, but is this audience genuinely interested in the subject? Perhaps this demonstrates that not everything can be remediated properly. This brings up the subject of virtual communities. One might infer from watching the recordings that a larger online population is now aware of what is happening in Iran. However, the question is whether this online group is so close-knit that they would heed the call to engage in cyberactivism. It appears that there is a good probability that performative activism will take place in this situation. In connection with this, a formation of e-movements on TikTok connected to the 2022 protests can certainly be observed, but do these e-movements transfer into virtual communities eventually?

Some recurring themes can be identified after reviewing the previous videos. First, there are several overlapping motifs throughout the videos. A hashtag commonly used in the videos is #mahsaamini. Probably because this is a well-known incident, people are more aware of the subject matter of the video, thereby enhancing the spreadability and searchability of the videos. However, the hashtag helps draw attention to the women in the videos. Mahsa Amini was remediated to TikTok and through the use of hashtags continuously remediated, becoming a symbol for women's protest. The arguments made by cyberactivists are reinforced by the symbol of Mahsa Amini, even if the Iranian Regime uses the revolution as its emblem in newspapers to support its claims and legitimise its authority. An emotive story served as the background to this female symbolism. The visuals are intended to evoke a specific emotional response, while also imparting information. Why are these protestors demonstrating? Why are people so upset when they protest? The main subject of these videos

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<sup>154</sup> ADA, "Iran."

was protesting women. There were pictures of ladies crying and cutting their hair, a prominent symbol of femininity. Simple information was the focus of the other visual concept. This was evident in several different creator videos. Although emotion was still present in the videos, there was more text, and they were more informative than emotive. The informative style indicated that the videos were intended to educate users about the protests in Iran. As a result, although both tales make use of emotion, they do so in different ways.

The second area of emphasis was TikTok's global reach. The different users communicated with their respective audiences and different online communities to inform them about the same subject by uploading their videos. Most of the remarks were motivating. Reading the comments reveals that some viewers were puzzled before the video, but they understood the subject after hearing what other viewers had to say about what was happening. Therefore, TikTok may be a useful platform for disseminating information and raising awareness, but for the video to effectively convey its message, it must be customised for TikTok. Thus, TikTok affordances decide how effectively an activist video can be spread. For example, the second video did not do this particularly well, leaving a lot of opportunity for interpretation. It was intriguing to observe how certain videos appeared to replace the techniques employed by newspapers to gather an audience. Both newspapers and TikTok videos use large, bold word titles to complement the accompanying pictures.

Finally, it was intriguing to see how TikTok censored content. A very clear example of this is the deletion of *Goldie Ghamari's* account, but other unspoken messages made it clear that creators are limited by TikTok affordances, causing them to be subject to the rules of the platform and may not be completely free to express their own opinions. Videos can only be a specific length, to start. This limits the amount of information a creator can impart to their audience. Additionally, it may be argued that users are constrained by what their audience wants to see. TikTok might be a terrific place for them to express their cyberactivism if they are part of a particular community interested in the same topics. However, in other instances, such as with user *ADA*, her audience's preferences are different, causing her to produce distinct videos. It seems from *ADA's* profile that she never again produced a video about the Iranian unrest after this one.<sup>155</sup>

While social media platforms like TikTok and others brag about their democratic environments and bottom-up design, it is unclear whether this freedom is absolute since producers are still constrained by the aforementioned standards. Whereas national newspapers

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<sup>155</sup> ADA, "Iran".

are still to this day restrained by governmental censorship, digital platforms are governed by their Terms of Use and ideologies, thus similarly restricting users. Activism on newer media platforms is very clearly remediated to cater to the audience most likely to be on these platforms. Young people who believe in equal rights and women are very present on TikTok, so the emphasis on women as symbols makes sense. Therefore, when activism travels from older to newer media forms, it must adapt to the affordances, e-movements, virtual communities, and censorship of a platform.

In the following chapter, I will analyse the perception of the presented TikTok videos by both public and private figures through both interviews and other forms of media.

#### **4. Analysing the protests: The perception of TikTok videos on the Iranian protests.**

In this chapter, I will analyse how public and private figures perceive activist TikTok videos. The Netherlands will be the focus of my analysis of the perception of TikTok videos because that area is within the bounds of this study. As previously stated, the perception of Dutch Iranians was obtained through interviews. These interviews were unstructured and relied on video elicitation to elicit responses from interviewees. Three interviews were conducted, each lasting about an hour. These interviews concentrate on non-public persons' interpretations of the activism and symbolism depicted in the videos. In contrast, I sought to investigate public figures' perceptions of TikTok activism to understand how activism might transition from

newer media forms like TikTok to more conventional media forms like talk shows, and how it is remediated to fit these traditional platforms. This impression will be examined in the Dutch show *Op1*, where three public figures cut their hair to support Iran. An analysis of a brief video clip of Dutch politician Sigrid Kaag, who chose not to cut her hair when asked about it, contrasts with this analysis. By analysing these various components, I intend to convey both public and private perceptions of TikTok activism and whether this activism might foster communities and unity.

## **Participants**

The private perception of activism in TikTok videos has been analysed through interviews with video elicitation. The interviewees who were available to give an interview were all connected. Two of the interviewees met through social media in a call to the university to take action on protests. One of these two was already familiar with the other interviewee and advised me to speak with them. Thus, the interviewees already formed some sense of community, though not entirely a virtual community. It is clear, however, that through the Iranian protest e-movement these people became more solidary with one another. In the interviews, I want to relate the common themes I found in the analysis in the previous chapter and compare this with the perception of the videos. Then I will report any other interesting findings that did not come to light in my analysis.

First, however, we will dive deeper into the background of the participants. Since the interviewees want to remain anonymous, I will refer to them as participants A, B, and C. A was born in Iran, but their parents came to the Netherlands when they were twelve as political refugees.<sup>156</sup> The reason their parents became refugees was that in 2009, during the Green Movement, it was forbidden to talk about the fraud done by the president. However, their father spoke out and they had to flee.<sup>157</sup> Thus early in their life, A could see the censorship imposed by the Islamic regime in action. B has a similar story even if they were not born in Iran. Their father was again very politically active in Iran, was put in prison and eventually had to flee to the Netherlands.<sup>158</sup> The situation of C is a bit different. They only moved to the Netherlands four years ago for their studies; thus most of their direct family still lives in Iran.<sup>159</sup> Therefore, all participants are part of the Dutch-Iranian community. Interestingly, two of the participants got to know each other because of their common goal in the protests. They

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<sup>156</sup> A., interview by Sophie Koole, Rotterdam, March 9, 2023.

<sup>157</sup> A., interview.

<sup>158</sup> B., interview by Sophie Koole, Rotterdam, March 13, 2023.

<sup>159</sup> C., interview by Sophie Koole, Rotterdam, March 19, 2023.

met each other in class, but started working together on social media, in particular TikTok. They became part of the same e-movement. In the Netherlands, all participants were on TikTok during the 2022 protests to varying degrees. A and B were slightly more active on the platform than C. However, all participants admitted that TikTok was the tool they relied on the most to spread information and awareness about the protests. The common themes analysed in the previous chapter were Mahsa Amini, a focus on women, and TikTok as a global platform. Consequently, these were also some of the themes discussed with the interviewees.

### **Private perception**

Especially in the first video the focus on Mahsa Amini as a symbol and power to women was strongly present. I noted that the video was meant to speak to someone's emotions. All three participants mentioned that they had seen this video. This already emphasises the transnational nature of TikTok. Participants A and B had pretty much the same answers. They thought the video was good and they had already watched it many times because it was so beautiful. Thus in this case this video reached its intended purpose. C, however, noted something interesting. They mentioned that yes, cutting hair can be a symbol of bodily autonomy, but for a certain community in Iran, cutting hair is done when people are in mourning.<sup>160</sup> This element adds an extra layer to the video. Thus, we can see that the video can be perceived differently based on existing knowledge. C also mentioned that they found the video beautiful but preferred more informative videos.<sup>161</sup> Thus, on a big platform like TikTok, not everyone will agree on what they want to see. Perhaps the interaction with the platform according to what people want to see creates smaller virtual communities where like-minded people can find each other. This also supports the finding that news must be remediated to fit a certain platform to engage an audience. Even then, a video may become popular based on audience preferences. Therefore, for activist creators on TikTok, it is important to know and understand their audience. Furthermore, B mentioned that they had cut their hair as well.<sup>162</sup> Thus, protest trends starting on TikTok can travel to people in real life. Since they are also active in real life in the protest, they mentioned the feeling of being able to relate to the video.

The second video analysed with the video participants was the one removed by *Goldie Ghamari*. A mentions getting very emotional while watching this video and not being able to

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<sup>160</sup> C., interview.

<sup>161</sup> C., interview.

<sup>162</sup> B., interview.

finish the video.<sup>163</sup> B relates their own life to the struggle the students face in the video. They mention that they almost feel guilty while watching this video.<sup>164</sup> C again had a different reaction. They mentioned that they thought this video was shown by people in line with the government. To portray people protesting as wild and untamed in trying to break down a door.<sup>165</sup> Thus, this again relates to how different videos can be perceived differently by different people. As a consequence, these people may start to interact in different ways with the video. The TikTok affordances are therefore influenced by the way a video is remediated and how the audience perceives it.

The third video was received a bit differently by the participants. Some mentioned that they were familiar in real life with the creator. The participants further delved into performative activism. They mentioned that they thought in this case that the focus was more on the person itself rather than the protests and that they did not necessarily agree with this. Furthermore, B mentioned that they saw this happening more often. Once people managed to get a platform to post a lot of information about the protests, their posts started to change and become more self-centred.<sup>166</sup> This is an interesting topic. TikTok is a very good tool for spreading information, but it can also be used for other purposes.

The fourth video was generally very well received as well. This time, all three participants agreed that the video was informative and a call for action. B mentioned that these types of videos are probably where they would find information to then share with their followers.<sup>167</sup> This once again emphasises that *Ariana Jasmine* has done a good job of reading her audience and remediating her message to fit the TikTok platform.

The fifth video is an interesting case. B mentions that they are in doubt about the video. On the one hand, they think that a video like that can draw a more diverse public to activism online. They also mention that even if a video like that means people are 1% interested, it is still better than nothing. They do question however how much people are going to keep on concerning themselves with this issue after learning about it through this video.<sup>168</sup> C agrees with this. They mention that it is hard to keep people interested in politics and activism and that videos like these are maybe the way to go. Furthermore, they mention that they saw this type of thing a lot. First, users reference pop culture and then talk about a

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<sup>163</sup> A., interview.

<sup>164</sup> B., interview.

<sup>165</sup> C., interview.

<sup>166</sup> B., interview.

<sup>167</sup> B., interview.

<sup>168</sup> B., interview.



serious topic. They thought that because it was a trend, it could help the Iranian cause.<sup>169</sup>

Thus, some interesting observations came out during the video elicitations. Firstly, it depends on someone's preference whether a TikTok video has the desired effect. Some people might find informative videos, almost like news outlets, older media- better. Others may prefer another approach. Second, the travel of trends and the use of symbolism can be well observed as coming full circle. People in Iran started cutting their hair symbolically to emphasize the removal of bodily autonomy in relation to Mahsa Amini. This eventually travelled to TikTok where it gained traction. The videos of people cutting their hair resonated with their intended audience, since protesters started cutting their hair in real life. Thus, through TikTok, the symbolism of haircutting and Mahsa Amini translated well. Lastly, it seems that all participants agreed that TikTok was a great platform to spread activism. The consequence of performative activism was certainly in the back of their minds, but they mentioned that wrong attention is better than no attention at all.

So, I have observed how TikTok activism has translated to a TikTok audience. However, does TikTok activism also translate to more public figures? In the next part, I will observe clips of different Dutch public figures who have all responded to the hair-cutting trend.

### **Public perception**

It has been established that TikTok is a great tool for spreading information and following trends. However, these trends can then come back to more traditional media forms again, completing the circle. This also happened with the trend on TikTok. The question is whether a trend like this has a place outside of TikTok or should just stay there. The Dutch talk show *Op1* is such a traditional media form where this TikTok trend was discussed. In the beginning, the speakers themselves mention the power of social media to reach a broad audience.<sup>170</sup> To emphasise this point one of the speakers starts cutting their hair. Thus, in this case, traditional media was used to emphasise the power behind social media in a collaboration between the two forms of media. The host mentions Oriana Fallaci, an Italian journalist, who even before the revolution, in conversation with Khomeini, took off the veil she wore to interview him in protest.<sup>171</sup> She says that she has always been a fan of people like this. This once again

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<sup>169</sup> C., interview.

<sup>170</sup> *Op1*, "Solidariteit Met Iraanse Vrouwen," 0:00-0:11.

<sup>171</sup> Dwight Garner, "The Life of Oriana Fallaci, Guerrilla Journalist," *The New York Times*, October 16, 2017, sec. Books, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/16/books/review-oriانا-fallaci-biography-cristina-de-stefano.html>.

emphasises haircutting as a symbol.<sup>172</sup> In this case, an old symbol of removing a veil is mentioned as a reason why activists should be cutting their hair today. The host also mentions that the impact of cutting hair live on a talk show can be enormous.<sup>173</sup> Implying that a lot of people still relate to traditional media, perhaps people that are not on TikTok themselves but become curious after watching this happen on a talk show. When another person at the table cuts their hair, people are talking about other topics and seem less interested. However, when the host cuts her hair, people are applauding.<sup>174</sup> This implies that perhaps in media forms like these, the focus is more on the host. This can be compared to an influencer on TikTok, for example.

In contrast to using this trend, there have also been people who explicitly do not want to do this. Dutch politician Sigrid Kaag mentions not wanting to cut her hair in solidarity, because she thinks it would be more useful to apply economic pressure to Iran.<sup>175</sup> She says that she wants to support Iran on her way. If she wants to cut her hair, she will choose the moment when she wants to. This implies that trends may not be for everyone. People can pick and choose which trend they want to follow and what applies to them. Perhaps because she is a politician and can apply pressure on the Iranian government, Kaag does not feel the need to make a symbolic gesture as well. However, for ordinary people, this symbolic gesture might be the only thing they feel they really can do. Thus, applying trends taken from TikTok to everyday life can be different for everyone.

In summary, people respond differently to TikTok activism according to their beliefs. Some people might be inspired to follow activist trends they find on the platform. These people seem to attach a great deal of importance to the idea that symbolic and emotional gestures can bring a community together. By cutting their hair together, they want to make an activist statement. They mentioned feeling connected, not only to each other but also to people in Iran. Other people believe these symbolic actions fall more under the term of performative activism, they, like Sigrid Kaag for example, believe that their efforts are put to better use elsewhere. Of course, one has to keep in mind that Sigrid Kaag has the means to put her efforts elsewhere, other people are not as fortunate. Thus, through symbolic actions and keeping trends alive, these people might feel that they are doing everything they possibly can. It is difficult to say whether Iranian activism on TikTok has created virtual communities. E-

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<sup>172</sup> Op1, "Solidariteit Met Iraanse Vrouwen," 0:36-0:50.

<sup>173</sup> Op1, "Solidariteit Met Iraanse Vrouwen," 0:57-1:00.

<sup>174</sup> Op1, "Solidariteit Met Iraanse Vrouwen," 2:17-2:25.

<sup>175</sup> De Telegraaf, "Kaag voor het blok gezet tijdens persconferentie," YouTube, October 7, 2022, 1:07 to 1:18, [Kaag voor het blok gezet tijdens persconferentie - YouTube](#).

movements have certainly been formed, but the question is whether these movements can transform into eventual virtual communities. Is the situation in Iran important enough for people on the platform to form and stay in virtual communities? As the interview participants mentioned, most of the people involved in online protests had an Iranian background. While activism on TikTok might reach an international audience, the question is what this audience does with the information that is given to them. Do they create solidarity and do they feel the need to help? This is again based on a person's belief system. Public figures can show solidarity with the activism presented to them on TikTok, as we observed in the talk show. However, the question remains as to whether these public figures are sympathetic to the cause or if they want to seem in agreement with their own goals. Furthermore, it is interesting to observe that when activism has been remediated successfully, like the hair-cutting trend, it is remediated again to fit more traditional media narratives like talk shows.

## 5. Conclusion

This thesis examined the ways Iranian uprisings had been mediated and reported since 1979 and compares various older and newer forms of media in particular TikTok. An analysis of several pro- and anti-Islamic regime newspapers provided a historical analysis of the mediation of Iranian uprisings. Additionally, five TikTok videos provided an in-depth visual and textual analysis, supported by a perceptual analysis of these videos through interviews and television shows. This approach was informed by media theory in relation to activism, the attribute model introduced by McMillan and Hwang, and discourse on cyberactivism.

This thesis argued that activism travels from older to newer media forms. Through this process, international e-movements are shaped. International virtual communities proved to be less significant and highly dependent on the way information was remediated, hereby considering the affordances of the platform. Older forms of media in Iran, such as newspapers, were subject to heavy censorship imposed by the regime. This resulted in these publications having to change their terminology to fit the narrative perspective of the regime. Therefore, the regime's censorship influenced the newspaper's mediation by imposing terminological remediation. Both pro- and anti-regime publications mostly used certain terminology to fit their narrative. Symbolism played an important role in media framing as well. Especially, the regime relied heavily on the heroic portrayal of the revolution and putting away anti-revolutionaries as dissidents and criminals. As is seen with the Green Movement, with the transfer from older to newer media forms, it became much more difficult for the regime to impose censorship. Newer media forms enabled a more bottom-up approach, which meant that these protests did not have a formal public leader who could be arrested. Furthermore, protesters who participated in these online posts were harder to find than newspaper publications. However, as activism was transferred to online platforms, a new form of censorship was invoked, namely using algorithms and affordances.

When looking at how activism on TikTok is transmitted, it becomes clear that for the remediation of information to be successful, creators must embrace the affordances of TikTok. An example where this was executed well was the video posted by user *Ariana Jasmine*, who combined older media elements, catchy titles – with newer media elements – music, and video. In this case, the information is delivered to the audience of the platform while at the same time being engaging and interesting to watch, as indicated by the interviewees. Although TikTok provides a bottom-up way to share information, users are still bound by the rules of the platform. This leads to the discussion of whether newer media

sources can define themselves as completely free and democratic or if certain censorship is also imposed on these platforms through the affordances of a platform. An interesting observation was the use of symbolism on TikTok, in contrast to the use of symbolism in newspapers, which cater to the intended audience. Whereas the symbolism in newspapers was mainly about the revolution in a general sense in which women did not play a primary role, on TikTok both women and Mahsa Amini stood as symbols for the protests. The TikTok data explains this, as the majority of TikTok users, 57%, identify themselves as a woman. This symbolism resonates with the intended audience of the platform. This thesis observed that through TikTok affordances and remediation, this symbolism was not only shared internationally but also allowed users to portray themselves if they identified as women – as a symbol.

This thesis also concluded that the perception of these videos depended on the person's personal beliefs and knowledge. The interview participants shared different opinions about which videos they would share and which videos they liked. This contrast was also found in the analysis of public figures in relation to the trend of cutting. It was observed that activism on TikTok did incite a formation of e-movements. However, this thesis also questioned whether these e-movements can evolve into longstanding activist virtual communities, or if most user engagement was based on performative activism.

More research is needed to answer some of the issues raised in this thesis. This may include a comparison of media under censorship in an authoritarian regime and the evolving newer media forms from that with media in non-authoritarian regimes. This would allow us to gain insight into whether newer media hold the same position in cyberactivism. Furthermore, it would be interesting to conduct broader, transnational research on the perception of activist videos. This thesis targeted a Dutch context, but it would be interesting to analyse the perception of these videos across borders and identify social and cultural differences. Lastly, a study on the long-lasting effects of cyberactivism on a protest might be of relevance. This thesis observed that online protests like the Green Movement managed to survive partially because of cyberactivism and the ability to establish international solidarity. Because TikTok as a platform has not been around too long and is mostly known for short trends, it would be interesting to observe if cyberactivism on this particular platform can be sustained.

This thesis has contributed to the literature on media theory and activism by providing a non-Western case study and including a relatively new platform of mediation. Most of the cases of cyberactivism tend to focus on Twitter and Facebook, despite the growing emergence of digital platforms. Moreover, while the Arab Spring in 2011 did lead to more literature on

protest in a non-Western context, the relation with new media such as TikTok has not been drawn often. This is highly relevant in the context of authoritarian regimes, as social media are much harder to regulate. Lastly, I hope that this thesis not only to the existing literature but also draws attention to the still ongoing protests in Iran, in particular the suffering of the Iranian people. By investigating Iranian censorship and cyberactivism on TikTok, I hope to emphasise the resilience of the Iranian people under authoritarian censorship.

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