(Digital) Solidarity as a Collectively Performed Imaginary and its Challenges

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The death of Mahsa Jina Amini three days after her arrest by morality police in Tehran sparked the development of massive protests in Iran, which were unprecedented in terms of both their geographic scope and the variety of social backgrounds of the protesters. Sara Bazoobandi, a prominent voice highlighting the freedom of choice for Iranian women, contends that the struggle for women's right to freedom of choice began decades before the most recent protests in the aftermath of Amini's death. She further outlines the early history of women's resistance to the dictatorship. Her work highlights how soon after Ayatollah Khomeini's 1979 declaration enshrining compulsory hijab in the workplace, Iranian women flocked to the streets to protest and were viciously beaten by pro-Revolution forces that would later become the morality police who detained Amini. Thus, by tracing the historical roots of the current turmoil, Bazoobandi contends that Iranian demonstrators' current rejection of the

headscarf does not always imply a rejection of Islam or Islamic beliefs but broader socio-political injustices.

While Bazoobandi emphasises continuity with the past, Nima Khorrami asserts that the current protests are distinct from earlier movements in three pertinent ways – i) the prominent role of women in leading the calls for change; ii) the movement's widespread nature, which has attracted support from wealthy business people and celebrities in addition to middle-class and working-class individuals; and iii) the unrest's diverse geographic scope, which has included both small and large cities. According to Khorrami, these distinctions make meaningful change feasible if outside players support Iranians who are fighting the regime directly and indirectly, setting a clear example of how new forms of solidarity are needed, and not to merely emphasise continuity with the past. Even before the death of Amini, an online social movement known as "My Stealthy Freedom" (MSF) was launched on Facebook nearly a decade ago. The simple gesture of Iranian women uploading pictures of themselves without a headscarf provides them with a platform to express themselves, consequently providing a means to confront systemic injustice as they exercise (or claim to) their right to free choice. Though these efforts do indeed promote women's rights, they come with significant threats of imprisonment, or worse, to life itself.

Despite such threats, (digital) solidarity against injustice is being formed incrementally across the globe. Our contribution aims to shed light upon digital solidarity as a space where multiple imaginaries are formed and where some visions emerge as dominant, whilst others are invisiblised. In other words, we ask: has the MSF movement brought about adequate awareness of the current situation that torments Iranian women, or are the photos themselves distracting us from truly recognising the historical trends that have led to the build-ups of structural injustices over time? How are the systemic injustices that trigger the claim to different rights through digital solidarity articulated in framing the narrative and process of meaning-making?

Digital Solidarity on Social Media Platforms

Solidarity is an expression that brings together goals, objectives, and activities. Earlier iterations coined by Émile Durkheim suggest that the act of solidarity is

the bare minimum social bond required by any society to function. To maintain international order and assure the cohesion of international society, it is among the fundamental principles underlying contemporary international law. It is also with this spirit that the revised draft declaration on human rights and international solidarity - report of the Independent Expert on human rights and international solidarity, Obiora Chinedu Okafor, stresses 'the critical importance of the fullest expression and enjoyment of international solidarity for the optimal realization of human rights around the world.' Critical and conscious solidarity makes it possible to avoid asymmetries and injustices between and within States, as well as the structural barriers that create and maintain inequality on a global scale.

On the other hand, the phrase 'social solidarity' has a unique and significant meaning in the history of labour movements and other social and political ones, connoting both a sense of support for one another and a shared experience of opposition to an 'outsider' – in other words, drawing parallels with the 'us vs. them' scenario. In several philosophical and political contexts, solidarity is by and large linked to a sense of moral obligation to individuals who are far away from us (i.e., 'distant strangers') but whom we share a moral connection with. Furthermore, in some traditions, solidarity is also thought to involve interpersonal and communal connections.

Social media has developed into a significant forum for discussion, protest, and the exchange of information and, in effect, where some form of solidarity emerges and evolves. It has also been connected to numerous urgent macro developments. As a result, academics and the general public's interest has piqued in learning how social media affordances affect human behaviour. An affordance, according to Donald Norman, is "a relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object can possibly be used" (p. 11). Fayard and Weeks (2014) argue that "affordances offer a useful way of thinking about how practice is patterned by the social and physical construction of technology and the material environment" (p. 247). Social identity tradition describes how groups emerge in online ecosystems in an effort to meet these expectations. Through the exchange of complaints and jointly negotiated meaning, affordances of discourse contribute to a collective action framing process. They contribute to a collectively and gradually built narrative by sharing personal stories that are

meaningful to the community. Affordances of performance, on the other hand, are concerned with the enactment of protest through transgressive photobiographies that are purposefully staged to convey the movement's main prerogative to a wider audience. Transgressive photobiographies are defined as modular performances that can be used to criticise unjust laws, policies, court verdicts and administrative decisions in the vast bodies of contentious politics. Through risk-taking, these transgressive performances foster the construction of group identities. Another example showcasing the use of social media to promote solidarity was actions that followed George Floyd's unfortunate death. To promote the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and particularly to bring awareness to the world about the institutionalised and systemic injustice that manifested through the individual actions of the police force, millions of people, including celebrities and other influencers, would post a plain black image on their social media accounts. Such online critical solidarity is as much amplified by what scholars call hashtag activism.

Through these affordances and performance of solidarity, people perform meaning-making, collective narrative setting and formation of collective identity in solidarity against injustice. While the formation of solidarity through such collective action has been part of a human history, the coordination of such movement through big data and AI powered platforms comes with its own challenges to concerns of social justice.

Challenges of Digital Solidarity

We identify three challenges of digital solidarity: the invisiblisation of systemic and structural roots of injustice, limitations in platform governance (social media content management), and the digital divide. Each of them is discussed below.

Digital solidarity is a product of multiple imaginaries – i.e., collective visions of good and desirable futures – where some visions emerge as dominant, whilst others are invisiblised. An example of this is how oftentimes the systemic and structural roots of social injustice that trigger popular digital movements are distilled down into "purified" narrowly framed issues of isolated rights violation attributable to specific individuals or agents. In the Iranian protest case, the protest against compulsory Hijab has a deeper historical root than mere

grievance against one particular law or incident of death. It is a resistance against institutionalised and legitimised injustices experienced by women in and beyond Iran. Likewise, as widely argued, the root cause of #BlackLivesMatter movement spans beyond the many incidents of Black and Brown person's deaths; it is, in fact, about the institutionalised racial segregation and, as some scholars call it, a "condemnation of blackness". The claims to the freedom of choice and expression do not (and should not) stop at the good they bring to individual liberty, such as the protection of free expression and choice. Instead, collective action and solidarity are meant to go beyond and interrogate the institutionalised systems of inequality and marginality that hinder and disempower groups at the receiving end of intersecting marginalisation along ethnic, gender, racial, religious, sexual orientation, socio-economic and other backgrounds. One key challenge in digital solidarity is that the systemic and structural dimensions of injustice are often invisiblised by a disproportionate focus on advocacy for isolated incidents of rights violation.

The second challenge is that social media platforms can play a significant role in promoting or even silencing certain social movements. Bias in the content moderation process could silence the true meaning and intentions behind promoting a social movement and thereby merely promote the ideas that best suits their prerogative. This emanates partly from context and language blindness of the platforms' content management process, among other factors. In the Iran protest slogan case, a Facebook post by protesters used the phrase "marg bar," which was interpreted directly and (un)contextually as "death to" as opposed to its contextual "down with" translation, and had an automated ban reinforced by a human moderator until the Oversight Board overturns this decision. Such limitation can also be attributed to the engagement-driven content monetization based platforms' business model, overreliance in AI curation and the disproportionate dominance of Western values that shape the process of content moderation despite who the moderator is – i.e., whether done by moderators from the global South or North. Therefore, it is incumbent that experts and relevant rights holders on the ground ensure that the digital solidarity movement is steered in the right direction and continues to facilitate meaningful dialogue that does not take away from the purpose of such a movement.

The third challenge concerns the broadly discussed digital challenge – the digital divide. The loudspeaker of social media is limited to those who can access the internet, who have an adequate level of digital literacy, and speak certain languages. While how social media platforms are purposed/tooled varies across cultures and societies, access to such usage depends on people's access to material and non-material digital infrastructures. This includes affordability, gender divide and racial inequality, and digital literacy, among other issues. Digital solidarity is not immune from this challenge and every campaign that gets wider clicks or online noise cannot be equated with the voice of the impacted. A cautionary and critical take on digital solidarity would examine how demands are framed and meanings are constructed, who shapes the narrative and how the whole process of building solidarity is linked with the reality on the ground.

Circling back in on the MSF movement, which did indeed shed light upon inequality suffered by Iranian women, has along the process lost its grit in exposing nascent structural injustices. Authors have alluded to the concerning tendencies of online movements steadily falling into the process of tablotisation . Studies have further shown that after the initial launch of the online campaign, it was no longer clear whether it was promoting women's rights or a social media brand for the creator of MSF, Alinejad. We must equally question the level of permanence a social media platform can provide for a campaign to survive online. Scholars have argued that social networking sites contribute as mobile but not durable materialities in the formation of social change networks. Hence, the fluid nature of emergence and disappearance of collective identities on social media challenges the idea of permanence. This and the three challenges alluded to above call for caution in placing heavy reliance upon digital solidarity. We ought to reflect on the disconnect between conversations that take place in a virtual space and those that happen in reality and begin to confront ourselves before we seek to form solidarity (or endorse existing ones), online or in person.

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