

Telegram Discourse on the 2017 Iran's Presidential Election

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Abstract

This paper explores the discourse in Telegram during the Iran's 2017 election period. Recently, Telegram has become the most popular social media in Iran, playing a significant role in recent social and political events. This paper examines the highest-ranking posts to provide a better understanding of Telegram posts' characteristics, dynamics, and potentials for producing the new discourses or reinforcing the existing ones. The materials of this study were gathered from the 620 most-viewed posts during the election period. The data were analyzed mainly with quantitative content analysis and completed with ethnographic content analysis. This study finds that counter discourses are not shaped in Telegram and the most viewed posts mainly reproduce and reinforce the dominant discourses. This finding also clarifies how the content circulation is affected by the national political events, such as the election.

Keywords: *Telegram, Iran, presidential election, content analysis, discourse analysis.*

Introduction

This paper tries to analyze the most viewed posts in a favorite instant messaging application (IMA) in Iran called Telegram. Although recently scholars have paid more attention to social media in Iran (Alavi, 2005; Faris & Rahimi, 2016; Iran Media Program, 2014; Mottahedeh, 2015), there have not been many studies concerning Telegram as a research field. Considering its popularity in Iran, doing such studies is necessary. Therefore, we focus on this application, especially its channels, to understand what types of posts and content are more popular and how they represent Iranian attitudes in social media. Analyzing the most-viewed posts can tell us much about users' preferences, tastes, motivations and reading habits. Moreover, we can identify channels

which have the main role in content circulation and analyze the affordances and potentials that give them such position. We carried out this study in the 2017 presidential election to identify how such important social and political events affect Telegram. Finally, we will be able to scrutinize the links between these posts and the dominant discourses in Iran to find out if there are any determinative (even productive) impacts.

However, Telegram has two domains to host its traffic. Telegram.org is allocated to personal chats, and Telegram.me hosts its channels and groups, both are popular in Iran. In fact, in June 2017, 69.9 percent of Telegram.me's visitors were Iranians. Furthermore, there are more than 380 thousand Persian channels in Telegram and more than 2 million posts are published in them daily. This is

an unprecedented situation in the social media history in Iran and is the outcome of Telegram being ubiquitous. Moreover, some of these unofficial channels have many members. For instance, @akhbarefori (InstantNews) had over 1.7 million users in June 2017 or @GizmizTel had more than 1.5 million members at the same time.

Additionally, analyzing political discussions in various platforms, especially during elections, has been an interesting subject for most scholars. At first, the researchers focused on internet as a general platform (Papacharissi, 2004; Schneider, 1996), but as social media became more diverse, political debates in different networks such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. were examined (Hopke & Simis, 2017; Ji, 2016; Larsson, 2017; Miller, Bobkowski, Maliniak, & Rapoport, 2015; Saebo, Rose, & Molka-Danielsen, 2010). Therefore, we decided to conduct this study during the 2017 presidential election. Thus, we will be able to show if social or political events affect the pattern of content distribution in Telegram or the characteristics of posts. Moreover, we can examine the relationship between the most viewed posts, and social and political discourses to see if they reconstruct or reshape the discourses.

Method

This study has applied content analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, to extract the manifest and latent meaning of posts, in addition to describing their formal attributes. Then, we blended these with ethnographic content analysis to validate, expand and verify interpretations. Using this method enabled us to go beyond statistical tables, which is common in quantitative methods, and discover narratives rather than numbers. In order to identify how social reality is constructed and represented in Telegram's channels, we added another level to

our examinations. In fact, quantitative content analysis only provided us with some simple numerical data. However, by applying qualitative and ethnographic methods we made more textual interpretations rather than just statistical ones.

Content analysis is a popular method in social science and communication fields (Krippendorff, 2004; Prasad, 2008; Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2014). In fact, there are many definitions of content analysis dealing with different aspects of this method. However, we based this research on Riffe et al. definition (2014) which sees content analysis as the systematic assignment of communication content to categories according to rules, and the analysis of relationships involving those categories using statistical methods. Moreover, based on Schreier's (2014) suggested plan, we began the content analyses by creating the research questions (which are articulated in the previous section) and selecting the sample. The research sample consisted of the most viewed posts in Telegram. In fact, Telegram puts a sign under each post (an eye icon) to show the number of views and we used it as a benchmark for measuring a post's popularity. Of course it is a quantitative measure and we cannot conclude that a post with higher views is necessarily more popular. However, it is the only standard that we have for measuring the posts' popularity on a big scale. Therefore, we used it with caution, by acknowledging its limitations. In the next step, we collected the 20 most viewed posts, daily from May 3 to June 2, 2017. In fact, we began the process 16 days before the Election Day (May 19, 2017) and continued it to 14 days later. As a result, we gathered 620 posts with the highest views in each day in the election period. The bot designed by Social Network Lab of Tehran University (@tlgrphy) was utilized to identify the most viewed posts. Preparing the sample, we built the primary code schema (based on our experiences and anticipations as

Telegram users) and four coders were employed to code the posts. Meanwhile, the coding frame was modified and edited by coders to reach a final sheet. Then, they coded the posts again based on the new frame. Quantitative and qualitative analyses methods were blended in taking these steps. For instance, we did not just put the posts in the predefined categories, but we redefined and modified the categories based on the content and forms of posts continually. In doing that, we based the process on an especial version of qualitative content analysis.

Ethnographic content analyses (ECA), as Altheide & Schneider (2013) described, is a mixed method for documenting and understanding the communication of meaning, as well as for verifying theoretical relationships. ECA is reflexive and circular in all of its steps and does not consider the data as numbers only, but narratives as well. This method actually blends the quantitative content analysis with participant observation to offer a qualitative approach to document analysis (Barnard, 2016). ECA provides a more powerful method in textual interpretation; and in this study, it bridges the quantitative content analysis with discourse analysis.

Views and Channels

Each post in Telegram has several attributes. We ascribed 12 attributes to each one, including the number of views, channels' type, channels' name, format, emoji, addressivity markers (hashtag, link, and username), post's type, content, orientation and subject. Every attribute clarifies a dimension of a post, and all of them provide a comprehensive understanding of a post. The number of views (NV) shows the popularity of a post. By focusing on the name and type of a publisher, we tried to identify who are the prominent players in Telegram, and who produces the Telegram's discourse. Moreover, the next 5 characters were used to explore the formal properties. First, we tried to find out which format is more popular. Then, we checked if a post included any hashtags, links, emoji, or usernames. Considering the previous and ongoing research, this analysis enabled us to compare the status of a post with a tweet. Finally, the last 4 attributes were used to see if these posts can ultimately produce new discourses or change the previous ones. Each of these attributes is discussed below.

The number of views. As a quantitative measure, NV clarifies the popularity of a post. We aggregated the NVs of all posts in each day to see if there is a meaningful change during the election period. Figure 1 shows the changes in the NVs of the 20 most viewed posts in Telegram.

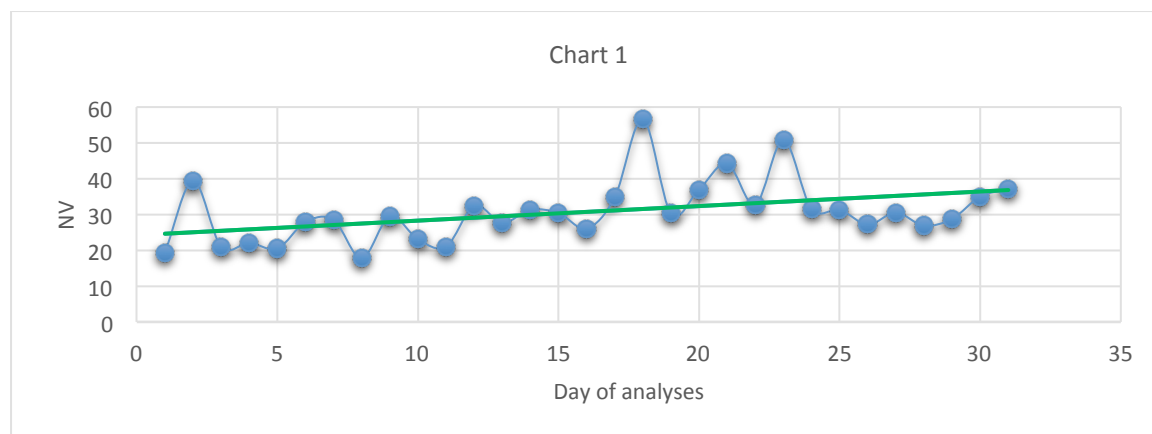


Figure 1. Number of views

Despite some fluctuations, Figure 1 shows that NVs were increasing steadily (the green line is the linear trend line which confirms our argument). The NV in the first day of analysis was 19.21 million and it reached 37.1 million in the last day. Logically, the maximum of NVs happened in the day after the Election Day, when everyone was waiting to hear the result. Moreover, the average of NVs during day 14 to 24 is higher than the NVs before this period. Similarly, the average of NVs after the days leading to the election (14-24 days) is higher than the previous days. Furthermore, the minimum of NVs on some days before the Election Day was more than the maximum of NVs on other days. For instance, the maximum of NVs on the first day was 1.4 million, whereas the minimum of NVs on the 18th day was 2.3 million. Surprisingly, the NVs on the 16th day, a day before the election, were lower than what was expected. This can be explained by the prohibition of presidential campaigns in that day. Since most of the posts before the Election Day were related to the campaigns, this was reasonable. However, we can conclude that political events have a positive impact on using Telegram. The effects survived for days after the election and it takes a while to come back to the status quo.

In order to use the aforementioned explanations, two points should be considered. First, we consider the sum of the most viewed posts' NVs as an index of total NVs in Telegram. Obviously, these are two different numbers but we can suppose that higher most viewed posts' NVs represent higher total NVs. Second, during our analysis we noticed an interesting point. Not all views in Telegram are real. The problem of fake views is important because it can bias the result. Clearly, the views of four posts were fake in this study, all of which were advertising posts. This fact emphasizes the importance of economic motivations in Telegram which can be followed in further research in the light of attention economy literature (Ciampaglia, Flammini, & Menczer, 2015). It was interesting that all of these posts were the first or second posts in the most viewed posts list, even on the Election Day. For example, the most viewed post on the 23rd day had 15.6 million views. This post was an advertisement for a football betting website. However, these fake views did not interrupt our analysis due to their small numbers (4 posts out of 620 posts).

Channels' types and names. Among the channels which broadcasted the most viewed posts during the election month, we identified 10 types of channels according their ownership. Considering these types, two levels

of themes were arisen. The first theme differentiated between unofficial and official channels. The second theme arose from official channels. It divided official channels to news channels and non-news channels.

Table 1. Channels types

No	Primary theme	Secondary theme	Type	Frequency	Percentage
1	unofficial channel		unofficial channel	327	53
2			news agency	156	25
3			news website	53	9
4		News	website	8	1
5		channel	newspaper	18	3
6			Governmental	8	1
7	official channel		organization		
			personal channel	31	5
8		Non-News	non-governmental	3	0.04
		channel	company		
9			TV program	11	2
10			sport club	5	0.08
				620	100

We named those channels without any valid and clear relationship to a specific person or organization (e.g. a company or institution) *unofficial channels*. For example, there were some fan channels for sport clubs, which we classified as unofficial channels and only put the channels with an official announcement in the channels' info page or club's website in the sport club category. Unofficial channels vary according to their content, but we did not separate them because this category was sufficient. However, we will discuss it later when considering the content of posts.

Although it is clear how we named official channels, some points need to be mentioned. First, we classified IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting) related channels (e.g. a TV network's channel) as governmental channels. It is true that IRIB is not directly controlled by the government, but it is mainly supplied by government's money. Moreover, it is not obviously a private organization and acts

as a state institution. Therefore, we decided not to add a category for these channels and put them in the governmental category. Furthermore, we differentiated between a TV network's channel and a TV program's channels, since the applications and goals of these channels are different although all of them belong to IRIB. Second, we put channels which obviously belong to a specific and recognizable person, in the personal category, without considering if that person writes the post him/herself or not. Thus, we classified Iranian leader's channel (@Khamenei_ir) as a personal one, while its posts are clearly not written by him.

Table 1 shows that unofficial channels consist the majority (53 %) of broadcasters. Considering the variety and extent of them, it is logical. Moreover, the majority of official channels are news channels. While 38 percent of broadcasters belong to news channels, they form 85 percent of official channels themselves.

Similarly, news agencies' channels are more popular among news channels. This result indicates that people mostly employ Telegram to gain information and know about current affairs. Furthermore, they usually get news from official sources. Discourse analysis showed that those authoritative channels mainly promote the dominant and state discourses. Therefore, we can argue that Telegram emphasizes and expands the dominant discourses and does not

produce new or counter ones. This can be challenged by the impacts of unofficial channels. In fact, it may be said that some unofficial channels challenge the dominant discourses. We will explore this next. At the first stage, we wanted to see if the unofficial channels (especially the dissident ones) were among the top broadcasters and, at the next phase, we just focused on dissident channels to compare their status with top broadcasters.

Table 2. The top broadcasters

No	Channels' name	Type	No. of posts.
1	Fars (including its subchannels)	Off/ News/ News agency	35
2	Isna94	Off/ News/ News agency	32
3	Tasnim (including its sub channels)	Off/ News/ News agency	25
4	Gizmiztel	UnOff	21
5	MizanOnline_ir	Off/ News/ News agency	13
6	yjnewschannel	Off/ News/ News agency	13
7	rouhani96ir	Off/ Non-News/ Personal	10
8	NavadTV	Off/ Non-News/ TV program	10
9	khamenei_ir	Off/ Non-News/ Personal	9
10	khabaronline_ir	Off/ News/ News agency	9

Table 2 shows that nine broadcasters in the top ten list are official, and there is just one unofficial channel. The discourse analysis confirms that none of the top channels is dissident. In fact, all of them reproduce and redistribute the dominant and state discourses. Six of them are official news agencies which belong to state institutions or governmental organizations. For example, it is believed that the first top broadcaster (Fars news agency) is controlled and sponsored by the revolutionary guard. Furthermore, Isna is a governmental news agency, and Tasnim is considered as one of the most radical news agency that publishes lots of anti-west and anti-reformist content. In addition, the Iranian leader's channel is among the top ten. This indicates that authorities

employ Telegram to disseminate their views. The only unofficial channel (Gizmiz) is an entertaining channel which mainly broadcasts fun and interesting posts. The discourse analysis confirms that none of its 21 posts during the election time included any dissident or critical elements.

The media mainly narrate stories about the world for people, even about themselves. Meanwhile, they convey meaning and construct views in people's mind. In such process, the media try to create people's narratives and discourses. Therefore, it is logical to assume that when people gain information from Telegram (especially from news channels) and most of these channels are obedient sources augmenting

the dominant discourses, Telegram generally reproduces and reconstructs the dominant narratives which have no risk for the state. Of

course, there are some opposite channels which share critical posts.

Table 3. The dissident channels

No	Channels' name	Type	No. of posts.
1	VahidOnline	UnOff	3
2	mamlekate	UnOff	2
3	Amadnews	UnOff	1
4	Momento1	UnOff	1

Table 3 indicates that the sum of the dissident channels' post are 7. Obviously, these post cannot disrupt the hegemony of state channels. Moreover, not all of these posts are critical. For instance, one of VahidOnline's post is a photo of thunder. It is important because VahidOnline is full of critical posts but none of them became popular except an entertaining post. Finally, we can conclude that Telegram is mostly prevailed by official and state channels which do not try (or want) to create counter discourses. Therefore, it mainly reproduces the dominant narratives. This will be further discussed in the following sections.

Formats, Emojis and Addressivity Markers

In this section, first, the formal properties of the most viewed posts will be presented, and then the usage of addressivity markers will be investigated.

Each Telegram post can be a text, image, video, voice or GIF. Moreover, a post can include one or two kind of these formats. For example, an image can be merged with a text in a post. Thus, we divided formats into two categories: primary format and secondary format. Overall, the primary formats of only 594 posts were recognizable. Twenty-six posts were deleted or their parent channels did not exist

anymore. The result showed that the primary formats of 72 percent of posts in this study were text. Image, with 17 percent, was the next popular primary format. Video (8%), GIF (3%) and voice (0.03%) consist other primary formats of the posts in this study. The secondary format of posts followed a similar pattern. In fact, only 323 posts had a secondary format. The secondary formats of 48 percent of posts were text and image consisted 51 percent of the secondary formats. GIF was the secondary format of only 1 percent of posts. Overall, we can conclude that channels' administrators prefer to use the text format for publishing their posts.

Regardless of the importance of text as a format, image was a popular element of post too. Interestingly, it is mostly preferred as the secondary format rather than the primary one. In fact, 164 posts had an image as their secondary format, while the primary formats of only 101 posts consisted of an image. This shows that images usually serve a complementary role, and are used to support the meaning of a text. Furthermore, some images are used as an ornamental element. These do not add anything to the message, and they are just used to make the posts visually acceptable and desiring. Moreover, some images are self-sufficient and contain some sentences embedded in them. Additionally, some images were used as documents to validate the

messages (e.g. picture of letters or instructions). Finally, the most notable type of image as a primary format is screenshot. These can be screenshots of anything but they are mainly screenshots of Twitter or Instagram posts. We discuss them more as posts' type later.

GIFs usage in Telegram posts is very similar to videos. In fact, GIFs are video files with reduced size, so that downloading them will be easier for users. Voice files had a minor role in Telegram posts, so we can neglect them.

In addition to the post's format, we analyzed the elements that are included in the most viewed posts. These elements can be classified into two sets: emojis and addressivity markers. Using emojis is very common in Telegram posts. Overall, 1092 emojis were used in 620 posts during the election time, which means that on average 1.76 emojis were embedded in each post. We identified seven different types of emojis utilized to meet various needs: discriminative, highlighting, encouraging, iconic, ornamental, phatic, and compensatory. Discriminative emojis were mainly employed to separate different parts of a message, while highlighting ones were used to emphasize a certain part of a message. In news texts, these emojis act like traditional journalistic formats such as sous-titer and subhead. Encouraging emojis usually try to persuade users to join the parent channel. Hand emojis, the main form of which is the one pointing to the channel's link. Iconic emojis simply represent something. For example, a camera emoji is used to represent a camera! Ornamental emojis are used to make a post more beautiful and colorful. Phatic emojis are used to show the author's sympathy. The most-used phatic emoji is hearts. Finally, a compensatory emoji tries to increase the richness of message. For instance, when the author expects that a reader is going to laugh, s/he uses a laughing emoji.

Logically, the type of emoji used in a post is determined by the post's content and the parent channel's type. For example, fun posts include more ornamental and compensatory emojis, while news posts usually consist of discriminative and highlighting emojis. Iconic emojis are mainly used in news and serious posts; but all channels show a common pattern of using encouraging emojis. Moreover, some channels have several rules in using emojis. For instance, @tasnimnews puts a camera emoji before each image's link. Others use a loudspeaker to show they are going to announce something important.

If emojis do not have any networking potential, addressivity markers inherently are considered as networking tools. A wide range of markers can be used in Telegram posts, but hashtags, usernames and links are the key ones. Unlike Twitter, users cannot use a VIA option in Telegram, but other types of addressivity markers are available. Analyzing the frequency and quality of addressivity markers' usage, can tell us more about the networking potential of Telegram.

While using hashtag is a usual action in Twitter, it is so rare in Telegram. Given that Telegram is an IMA, not a micro blogging network, it is not odd. In fact, Telegram lacks the networking potential. In Twitter, tweets circulate publicly and anyone can reach them. Therefore, using a hashtag connects people not considering if they follow each other or not. In Telegram, by using a hashtag you will be only able to see the posts in channels and groups you joined and personal chats you had. Thus, Telegram is more restricted and does not allow you to reach the posts from people who have not appeared in your circles before. To summarize, Telegram may mobilize people, but it cannot network them. As a result, networked publics cannot emerge in Telegram.

In this study, 147 hashtags were used in 620 posts which means 0.24 hashtags in each post averagely (compare it with the average emojis used in each post). Furthermore, we found 5 various kinds of hashtags: identifier, emphaziser, indexer, slogan and pointless. Identifiers provide some information about the message. People and event's name is the best example of this type. Emphasizing hashtags are used to highlight some points conveyed in the message or something that author wants to focus on. For example, (#maximum publishing) حداکثر توزیع was used to show that the channel's administrator wants users to publish the message in a massive scale. On the other hand, indexers operate as classifying signs. They separate different posts based on various factors. A slogan hashtag is normally a phrase which announces some political or ideological beliefs. Finally, we classified the hashtags that do not belong to one of the aforementioned types as pointless hashtags. For instance, (#members) اعضا does not pursue any clear purpose.

The second addressivity marker which we analyzed was the username. Users usually employ a username to mention a particular person. By mentioning a user, a notification is sent for her/him to attract her/his attention. In Telegram, channels can have a username like the one users have. Interestingly, each Telegram channel just mentions its username and does not refer to other persons or channels. It confirms

that Telegram not only cannot network people, but also its users (channels' administrators here) are not willing to. Consequently, mentioning another channel happened just one time in this study. In fact, @eghtesadonline (A financial news website's channel) mentioned Iranian leader's channel once. It supported our argument about Telegram not obeying the dominant discourses.

Mentioning usernames is not the channel's only method for promoting themselves. In fact, Telegram provides another way for its channels to refer to themselves. Administrators can embed their channel's link in their posts. It is not the only kind of links which are used in posts. There are links to the parent website, news images, news stories in the parent website and news stories in other websites. These types of links are usually employed in news posts, although using channels' link is common among all broadcasters. We could not find any patterns in preferring a username to a link for referring the channel to itself. It seems that administrators choose one, based on their digital literacy and do not pursue a particular goal.

Post's attributes. The last section provides formal information of the posts. In this section, we analyzed the posts' types, contents, orientations and subjects to explore more and clarify posts' qualitative characteristics.

Table 4. The frequency of post attributes

Post's attribute	Frequency	Percentage
Type		
News	366	59
Report	14	2
Comment	12	2
Quotation	32	5
Point	23	4
Public information	21	3
Yellow texts	14	2
Screenshot	25	4
Joke	28	4
Advertisement	10	2
Others	43	7
Content		
Political	234	38
Social	65	10
Sport	91	15
Economic	22	3
Accidents	61	10
Health	16	2
Cultural	19	3
Art	10	2
Religious	12	2
Combined	29	5
Others	42	7
Primary orientation		
Informing	401	65
Critical	44	7
Entertaining	46	7
Humanitarian	12	2
Propaganda	21	3
Supportive	19	3
Commercial	11	2
Didactic	10	2
Ironic	22	3
Others	25	4
Secondary orientation		
Informing	10	2
Critical	33	5
Propaganda	16	2
Supportive	14	2
Others	23	3

Results indicate that the majority of the most viewed posts consist of news posts (59%). In fact, the gap between this type and others is very wide. Considering the channels' types, which were presented in the second section, this result is expected. As we discussed, 238 channels

belonged to news organizations. Therefore, it is logical that most of the posts are news ones. Furthermore, result suggests that 142 news posts were published by unofficial channels. It also means that news channels do not necessarily limit themselves to news content.

By news, we do not mean what is traditionally called news. In fact, the standards of news writing have changed in Telegram and news writing has become similar to tweeting. Furthermore, channels that are entertainment-oriented (we call them entertaining channels in the future) frame news as any other posts. In this type of news writing, old and traditional rules are neglected and only the main points are written. These types of news are very short and try to convey only the key ideas. They are usually combined with personal beliefs and notions. Additionally, this new form of news is usually written in an informal style. While official channels, especially news ones, try to not get engaged in this new type of news writing, their posts more or less resemble those of entertaining channels. They mostly mention the news lead or quotations in short messages but try to use formal language and obey the news writing standards. In a broad sense, we can see quotations, comments, reports and screenshots as news too. Inherently, they are news but they are different in form, therefore we classified them in separate categories. These forms are supposed to convey messages and information such as news but each of them has distinctive characteristics. For instance, in a quotation post, the name and the position of the speaker are mentioned, immediately followed by his/her words. Unlike the traditional news, there are not any lead or clear news writing style anymore. Comments are like quotations in their form, but they are about specific people. Screenshots, on the other hand, are self-sufficient news. In fact, they are used to convey meaning in a faster and simpler way. For instance, if we want to change an Instagram post by a celebrity into news, we have to be familiar with journalism rules, and spend some time for it. Moreover, reading such news may be a time consuming action for readers too. However, anyone can take a screenshot of the post and publish it. It does not need any especial education and is even more valid. Consequently, new forms of news writing

have emerged in Telegram. Moreover, Telegram is now overwhelmed by news posts, where its informing role has been emphasized.

From the type of channels, it can be inferred that informing is the main function of Telegram. As we explained in section 2, most of them were news broadcasters. Logically, most of the posts are news messages too. This argument can be confirmed by analyzing posts' orientation. We considered two levels of orientation for each post: primary and secondary. Primary orientation is somehow clear and can be understood immediately, but secondary orientation is vaguer. Informing is the primary orientation of 65% of posts. Therefore, it underscores the importance of the informing role of Telegram.

Entertaining and critic are the next top orientations, although we can assume ironic posts as critical messages too. In fact, ironic posts are indirect critics. Considering this, critical posts (direct and indirect) form 10% of the posts' primary orientations. In order to analyze more, we identified what these posts criticized. Results show that most of the critical posts (64%) focused on election. Moreover, government was the subject of 36% of these posts. Additionally, political figures such as president Rouhani or candidates like Raisi and Ghalibaf were the next target for critical posts. Lastly, some controversial subjects like UNESCO's Education 2030 agenda or the problem of women entering the stadiums occupied the critical posts.

The discourse analysis confirmed that these critical posts did not disrupt the state and dominant discourses. Interestingly, some of them even supported those. For example, there were four posts criticizing the UNESCO's education 2030 document which had been condemned by Iranian leader in the election period. However, there were two posts which clearly challenged the dominant discourses. One

of them emphasized the women's right for entering stadiums and the other one asked people not to vote in the election.

Therefore, it was confirmed that Telegram does not interrupt dominant discourses for some reasons. First, critical posts formed a small portion of posts. Second, this small portion did not challenge the dominant discourses, even augmented them in some cases. Interestingly, dominant discourses were not amplified just by critical or informing posts. Some entertaining posts reinforced those discourses too. Hence, we can say that Telegram mainly informs people, but cannot change their established discourses. In the diffusion theory terms, it can be stated that Telegram is only effective in the first stages of diffusion.

Analyzing posts' types and orientations, we can probe the content of posts now. Results show that politics is in the heart of Telegram. Actually, 38% of posts are political, but it does not mean that channels deal with politics profoundly. In fact, 64% of political posts are informing messages. They are just used for announcing news, mostly everyday events and statements. In other words, these messages do not teach anything to increase the citizens' awareness or reveal political secrets that people may not know. Thus, we can conclude that Telegram deals with politics very superficially and in a simple way. After politics, sport is the major content in the most viewed posts. Actually, 15% of posts are about sports. The importance of sports becomes clearer if we focus just on the first posts in these 31 days. While analyzing the 20 most viewed posts helps us to discover general patterns and themes, focusing on first posts can show what is more important for users. Logically, we can assume that higher posts are more important than lower ones. Therefore, in such a scale, the first post in the most viewed posts' list is the most important one. The analysis showed that 10 posts out of 31 first posts are about sports, just one post less

than political ones and much more than other contents. This result indicates the importance of sport contents for users.

The next most popular contents are social (10%) and accidents (9.8%). The result of analyzing social content resembles that of political posts. Actually, the majority of these posts (70%) are informing oriented and only five of them (0.008) are critical. Moreover, three posts out of these critical ones are about Yurt mine tragedy, which only criticize government for its role in that accident. In fact, these critical posts have nothing to do with dominant discourses.

The popularity of accident posts along with the popularity of sport posts emphasizes the importance of entertaining posts for Iranians. In addition to informing political news, entertaining posts are the most favorite messages in Telegram. In fact, in this study 4% of posts (28 of them) were jokes, ranking this type as the fourth posts' type in the list. Moreover, the primary orientation of 7% of the posts (44 of them) was entertaining, along with eight posts which entertaining was their secondary orientation. Therefore, it can be said that accidents and sport posts, which are usually entertaining oriented, are the most popular posts in Telegram after the political ones.

Subject. As the final element, we analyzed the subject of posts. By subject, we mean what the post exactly deals with such as social event. The results showed that it is hard to find pervasive themes in the most viewed posts. In fact, there were too many different subjects that cannot be classified in summarizing categories. However, we identified six themes in the posts, most of which were short-termed and were affected by social and political events. Election is the major theme, surviving a longer time. In fact, it is the subject of 185 posts (30%). Chart 2 shows the distribution of posts about election.

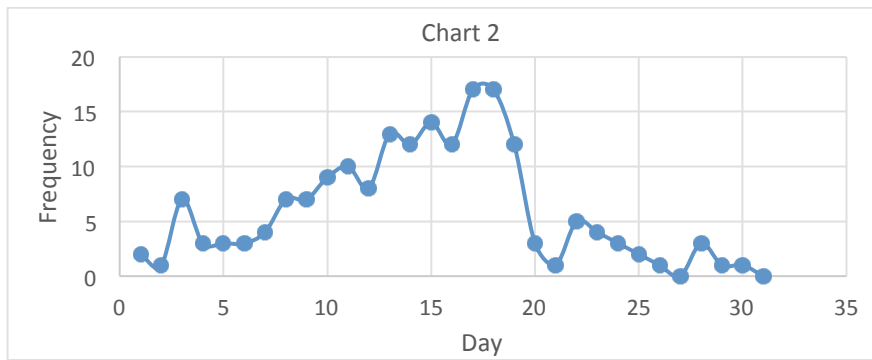


Figure 2. Distribution of posts about election

This figure indicates that election as a subject received more attention as the Election Day became closer. After the result of the election was announced, the popularity of this subject in posts dropped drastically and after 10 days, it reached zero. Considering that these posts' primary orientation was mainly informing (62%), this was a reasonable result. Logically, after the Election Day, there was less news about it and as a result, the related posts decreased.

The subject's themes confirmed the results we mentioned before. Election, as a political subject, was the first theme and sport competitions were the second one. It should be noted that sport had emerged as one of the most popular contents before. Similarly, celebrities, Yurt mine accident and TV programs as the next subjects were entertaining. Therefore, it is confirmed that politics and entertainment were the most popular contents in Telegram.

Conclusion

This paper explores the most viewed posts in Telegram channels during Iran's election period, to provide a comprehensive understanding of what is happening in this popular instant messaging application. We tried

to clarify the formal characteristics of these posts to determine how they were shaped. Moreover, we wanted to show if these posts have the potential to challenge dominant discourses or generate new ones. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed in this study.

First, the results showed that counter discourses are not shaped in Telegram. In fact, the most viewed posts mainly reproduce and reinforce the state and dominant discourses. Therefore, Telegram cannot cause a problem for the state and that is why this app has not been blocked yet like its precedents, such as Facebook and Twitter. Hence, we can argue that Telegram discourse is not anything but a representation of dominant discourses. Moreover, most of Iranian official organizations, media and institutions are using Telegram, which makes its content more obedient and non-threatening. While Telegram cannot be considered as a factor in producing counter discourses, it is certainly a good tool for staying informed and seeking information and news.

After news related attributes, entertainment is the most popular content in Telegram. In fact, sports and accidents are among the most wanted contents, and celebrities and sport competitions are the subject of top posts too. The popularity of

politics and entertainment in this IMA confirms our argument about the role of Telegram in reproducing the dominant discourses. In fact, Telegram is simply a reflection of dominant discourses in Iranian society, not an effective tool for producing new or counter discourses.

Results show that pervasive political events such as an election affect the Telegram

content notably. Election became the main subject of posts in the days approaching the Election Day and steadily diminished after that. Regardless of the election time, the majority of posts are political. However, results confirm that these posts deal with politics simply and superficially, which will not lead to significant awareness or changes in citizens' political knowledge.

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