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From Streets to Screens: Seriality and Political Communication in Iran's 'Women, Life, Freedom" Movement

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The proposed research investigates the role of seriality in the digital political communication of Iranian protest movements, with particular focus on the "Women, Life, Freedom" uprising. Building on scholarship on media seriality and political storytelling, the article examines how protesters employed recurring hashtags, episodic video updates, and viral formats across platforms such as Twitter/X, Instagram, and TikTok to produce an alternative narrative structure that opposed state-controlled discourse. The analysis conceptualises these practices as a form of "episodic dissent," where individual posts function as discrete narrative units while simultaneously contributing to a continuous storyline of resistance.
The paper will argue that seriality served three principal functions: first, it established temporal continuity, allowing dispersed acts of protest to be framed as unfolding episodes within a larger struggle; second, it fostered participatory engagement by inviting users to reproduce and adapt recurring formats; and third, it generated a cumulative archive that strengthened transnational solidarity and countered the erasure produced by censorship.
By situating Iranian digital activism within the logic of serial communication, the article contributes to broader debates on the relationship between media form and political practice, demonstrating how seriality operates as both a narrative strategy and a mode of collective resistance under authoritarian conditions.

Keywords: Women, Life, Freedom Movement; Iranian Seriality; Iranian political communication.

Introduction

In recent years, digital platforms have become integral to political communication, especially under authoritarian regimes where traditional media are tightly controlled. The case of the Women, Life, Freedom uprising in Iran offers a particularly compelling illustration of how activists deploy online tools to evade state narratives, coordinate dispersed action and craft ongoing counter-narratives. The movement, sparked in the wake of the death of Mahsâ Amini in September 2022, rapidly transcended national boundaries and became a symbol of gendered resistance, prompting scholarly attention to its digital dimensions (Tohidi, Daneshpour 2025). At the same time, the concept of seriality – a form of ongoing narrative or format marked by continuity, repetition and episodic segmentation – has gained traction in media studies as a way to understand how stories, formats and patterns of communication extend across time and media (Mittell 2018; Kelleter 2014). Yet the intersection of seriality and digital political activism, particularly in contexts of protest under authoritarianism, remains under-explored. This article responds to that gap by investigating how serial

communication practices shaped by protesters in Iran created a form of "episodic dissent"– a narrative-format logic in which individual posts or media episodes both stand alone and contribute to a cumulative storyline of resistance.

To frame this inquiry, I first situate the Iranian protest movement within the broader context of digital activism and media repression. Then I draw on media-theoretical work on seriality to show how recurring formats, episodic updates and viral structures can become tools of political storytelling. Next, I pose the core research questions: How did Iranian protesters use serial formats (hashtags, episodic video updates, viral templates) across platforms such as Twitter/X, Instagram and TikTok? What functions did this seriality fulfil in terms of temporal continuity, participatory engagement and archiving of resistance? I then outline the approach and structure of the paper: following a theoretical review, the methodology section describes the data and analytical framework; the findings section reveals how seriality operated in the "Women, Life, Freedom" case; the discussion reflects on the implications for media form and collective action; and the conclusion points to future avenues. In doing so, this article contributes to two intertwined literatures – digital activism in authoritarian contexts and the role of media form in political communication – by demonstrating that seriality is not just a stylistic or entertainment-industry phenomenon but an operative logic of resistance.

Digital activism under repression presents particular challenges and opportunities. In Iran, media are subject to heavy state control: internet shutdowns, filtering of social platforms, domestic state-broadcasted channels and the absence of free press all combine to create an environment where alternative voices must innovate (Rahimi 2022). Within this context, the "Women, Life, Freedom" slogan became a rallying cry for gender justice and broader demands for freedom. Research on digital protest in Iran has already highlighted how hashtags, memes, videos and diaspora networks played crucial roles. These contributions have generally focused on the content or reach of activism, or on computational analyses of stance (Khorramrouz et al., 2023). What remains less examined is how the form of communication – its structure, rhythm, repetition and episodic unfolding – shapes perceptions of continuity, fosters engagement,

and archives dissent. Here I propose to bring in the language of seriality to enrich this reflection.

Seriality, as a concept within media and narrative studies, refers to a dynamic in which discrete narrative units – episodes, posts, releases – are linked in time, share formal patterns or motifs, and contribute to a broader ongoing storyline. As reported by James Mittell, operational seriality is the ongoing mechanism by which narratives are segmented and distributed, inviting engagement over time and structuring expectation, continuity and transformation. (Mittell 2018, p. 230). This notion has traditionally been applied to television series, comic serials, and related entertainment formats (Kelleter 2014). However, nowadays is accepted that seriality extends beyond fiction into social media, where posting rhythms, recurring hashtags and template formats create patterns of ongoing communication. For example, Ruth Page argues that social-media posts often adopt a "series logic," in which updates become instalments that both stand alone and form a larger chain (Page 2013). In short, seriality offers a lens to examine how repetition, continuity and expectation structure not just entertainment but political communication.

The relevance of seriality to digital protest activism becomes clear when one considers how movements need to sustain momentum, maintain visibility, and create narratives of ongoing struggle. Protest scholars emphasise that one of the major challenges for movements under authoritarian conditions is the risk of fragmentation and erasure. Episodic manifestation – single protests, single posts – may vanish. Establishing temporal continuity helps activists frame dispersed actions as part of a coherent journey (Bouvier, Jin 2025). Moreover, when supporters reproduce and adapt recurring formats, participatory engagement is fostered: users become co-creators of the serial chain rather than mere spectators. In sum, seriality offers three key functions for digital protest movements: it creates temporal continuity, it fosters participation and it builds archives.

In the specific context of the Iranian "Women, Life, Freedom" uprising, activists harnessed these serial logics in multiple ways. First, they adopted recurring hashtags such as #زن_زندگی_آزادی (*Zan, Zendegi, Âzâdi* – "Woman, Life, Freedom") and similar Persian-language tags, which appeared in waves across

platforms, anchoring each post to a broader storyline of resistance. The hashtag thus became more than a label: it functioned as a serial marker, signalling that this post belongs to an ongoing sequence. Second, episodic video updates – short clips from street protests, interviews, testimonies – were shared repeatedly, often with similar templates or visual signs, making each update recognisable but also linking it to a wider chain of instalments. Third, viral formats – memes, visual templates, repetition of the same motif – enabled adaptation by users, who remixed, translated and re-posted, thereby co-producing the seriality of the movement. These practices show that digital activism is not only about message content but about structure and form: how the message unfolds over time, invites participation and builds collective memory.

Why does this matter? The hybrid form of serial digital activism matters because it transforms the temporality and spatial logic of protest. Instead of discrete, one-off events, the 'episodic dissent' model frames resistance as a continuing narrative. This reframing has important implications: it changes how supporters understand their role (as participants in a chain rather than isolated units), how visibility is achieved (through repetition and recognition of format) and how memory is sustained (through archives of posts, videos and formats). It also challenges state efforts to suppress or fragment protest by creating a networked, persistent structure of visibility. Furthermore, by emphasising the formal dimension of activism, this perspective bridges media-studies and social-movement research: activism is not only what is said, but how it is shaped in form and time.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design to examine how Iranian protesters, particularly during the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement, used social media platforms to produce serial forms of political communication. Rather than quantifying engagement or performing computational analysis, the research focuses on how recurring formats – hashtags, short videos, and visual templates – structured ongoing narratives of resistance. Accordingly, the study prioritises meaning, context, and form over numerical

measurement (Hine 2015; Pink et al. 2016).

The research applies a multi-platform approach, analysing material from Twitter/X, Instagram, and TikTok, which constituted the principal public arenas for Iranian activists and diaspora communities during the 2022–2023 protests (Tufekci 2017; Motlagh 2025). These platforms offer distinct affordances – text-based threading, visual documentation, and short-form episodic video – that enable comparative analysis of how seriality functions across media environments.

Data collection relies on digital ethnographic observation of publicly accessible content rather than participant interaction. The researcher adopts an interpretive stance, tracing patterns of repetition, rhythm, and narrative form across posts and videos. The corpus consists primarily of posts containing the hashtags #WomanLifeFreedom, #زن_زندگی_آزادی, and #MahsaAmini published between September 2022 and March 2023, supplemented by journalistic reporting and NGO documentation to contextualise internet restrictions and media suppression (Freedom House 2023; Amnesty International 2024).

The dataset reflects both domestic and diasporic expression, as access to Iranian platforms is frequently mediated by VPN use and transnational reposting (Naficy 2011; Kermani 2025). The analysis draws on established frameworks in seriality and media studies (Mittell 2017; Kelleter 2017) to interpret protest materials as interconnected narrative elements rather than isolated expressions.

Ethical considerations are central. The study is limited to publicly available content and avoids interaction with users to minimise risk. Analysis is conducted at an aggregate level, emphasising collective patterns instead of individual accounts (Markham 2018). Researcher positionality is addressed through reflexive transparency, recognising the asymmetries involved in studying activist media from outside the national context (Kozinets 2020). Validity is pursued through traceability and triangulation across platforms and sources (Tracy 2010).

Several limitations apply. Online content is vulnerable to deletion, censorship, and algorithmic filtering, resulting in a partial archive. Translation across languages and cultural systems introduces interpretive challenges, and the study does not assess political outcomes or causality. Nevertheless, qualitative

analysis provides a valuable lens for examining how serial communication structures visibility, memory, and collective presence in digital protest cultures (Hine 2015).

Seriality as temporal continuity: From events to episodes

The analysis of posts, videos, and hashtags associated with the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement demonstrates that Iranian activists developed a distinct grammar of serial communication that functioned simultaneously as a storytelling method and as a collective political strategy. Seriality was not an accidental by-product of social media platforms but a deliberate mode of meaning-making through which protesters created continuity, coherence, and community in an environment defined by fragmentation, censorship, and fear. By reconfiguring the temporality of protest and the structure of engagement, these activists translated political struggle into a series of connected episodes that together formed a living narrative of dissent.

One of the central findings of this research is that seriality transformed the way protest events were experienced and remembered. Each act of defiance – whether a street march, a graffiti message, or a viral clip – was framed not as a standalone occurrence but as an episode in a continuing storyline. The hashtag #WomanLifeFreedom became a serial anchor linking dispersed instances of protest into a temporally unfolding sequence. In the rhythm of posting, the intervals between events mattered as much as the events themselves: updates sustained momentum during internet blackouts, keeping the narrative thread alive through repetition and anticipation.

This pattern resonates with the already briefly mentioned Jason Mittell's (2015) notion of "operational seriality," where meaning emerges not only from content but from the temporal pattern of release. Just as television audiences experience continuity through weekly instalments, Iranian digital publics experienced continuity through recurring waves of posts. Activists used specific cues – such as caption formats, identical slogans, recurring motifs like the burning of headscarves or the chant "*Zan, Zendegi, Âzâdi*" – to mark each episode as part of an ongoing series. These textual and visual markers gave structure to a

movement that, in physical terms, was geographically dispersed and frequently interrupted by state repression.

The serial form thus created what Frank Kelleter (2017) describes as "cultural continuity through repetition." When internet connectivity was disrupted, diasporic Iranians and sympathetic users abroad replicated these serial signals, ensuring that each instalment, no matter how brief, resonated across time and space. This constant reiteration produced what Zizi Papacharissi (2015) calls an affective public, sustained through emotional rhythm rather than organisational hierarchy. In other words, seriality replaced traditional leadership structures with temporal coordination: the next episode always came, and it always carried the same promise of persistence.

Serial formats as participatory engagement

The second major finding concerns participation. Serial communication fostered what Henry Jenkins (2006) terms a participatory culture, in which audiences become producers by repeating, remixing, and adapting shared formats. Within the Iranian context, this participatory seriality became a vehicle for inclusion under repression. Because activism could be dangerous, reposting a hashtag or editing a short clip provided a low-risk form of contribution. Protesters and supporters produced countless variations on recognisable templates: protest chants layered over background music, sequences of martyr portraits, or split-screen videos comparing life before and after an arrest.

These iterations collectively formed what Limor Shifman (2013) describes as a "meme family", a serial chain of derivative works that maintains coherence through familiarity while evolving through difference. For example, the repetition of Mahsâ Amini's image – first as portrait, then stylised icon, then animation, then projection – constituted a serial progression of mourning that blurred the line between art and activism. Each variation was self-contained, yet its recognisability linked it to previous iterations, creating what Paolo Gerbaudo (2012) might call a "choreography of visibility."

This participatory rhythm offered psychological continuity for dispersed publics. Individuals who could not demonstrate in the streets could still "enter the

series" by reproducing its formats, transforming political solidarity into a networked authorship. Through such shared creative labour, the "Women, Life, Freedom" narrative expanded beyond Iran's borders into global feeds, echoing what Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp (2016) describe as deep mediatisation, where media not only represent social realities but constitute them through repetition and circulation.

Archival accumulation as resistance to erasure

Perhaps the most profound function of seriality in this context is its archival power. Under authoritarian regimes, information control depends on erasure: deleting posts, censoring keywords, arresting journalists, and restricting documentation. The "episodic dissent" identified in this study counteracted that erasure by producing an overabundance of instalments. Each post, tweet, or video contributed to a distributed archive that could survive partial loss. As Richard Rogers (2013) notes, digital networks operate through redundancy; serial accumulation transforms fragility into resilience.

During the months following Mahsâ Amini's death, thousands of short clips were uploaded showing protests, funerals, and acts of everyday resistance. Even when authorities shut down the internet inside Iran, diasporic communities mirrored these uploads, reposting them across time zones. The result was what Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany (2010) earlier observed in what they called "the Iranian *blogistan*": a polycentric communication system where the same message appears through multiple nodes, preventing total suppression.

Seriality, therefore, became a form of counter-archiving—a participatory record-making process that exceeded the control of state censors. The cumulative logic of these archives also redefined collective memory. Rather than a single commemorative moment, the movement generated a continuing memorial series: every new anniversary of Mahsâ Amini's death, every renewed protest, every court sentence triggered the next episode in the ongoing archive of resistance.

This aligns with the idea of what José van Dijck and Thomas Poell (2015) call "platform memory," where digital infrastructures themselves act as repositories of cultural history. Through hashtags and algorithmic retrieval, the

Iranian protest archive remains alive, searchable, and expandable. Seriality thus functioned not only as storytelling but as a technical tactic against authoritarian forgetting.

The visual syntax of episodic dissent

Close analysis of protest visuals reveals a shared visual grammar that reinforces seriality. Many Instagram posts, for example, used consistent framing: a black background, a red or white font, and text centred around the key triad "Women, Life, Freedom." TikTok videos often opened with a similar auditory cue—the chant "*Zan, Zendegi, Âzâdi*"—followed by new footage or commentary. This repetition of framing elements created what Roland Barthes might have called semantic anchorage: the image gains meaning through its position within a recognised chain (Barthes 1977).

In digital ethnographic observation, certain formats appeared repeatedly. One recurring series showed side-by-side videos – before and after imprisonment, hijab removal, or citywide protests. Another format juxtaposed protest footage with historical references, linking the 2022 events to the 1979 revolution, creating continuity across decades (Rahiminia 2024). These visual recurrences formed narrative scaffolds, allowing audiences to navigate complexity through recognisable templates.

The strategy mirrors what Kelleter (2017) calls serial reflexivity – the capacity of a serial form to comment on its own repetition. In reposted protest clips, captions often referred to earlier episodes with intros such as "We are still here," "The struggle continues," "One year after Mahsâ." Such metacommentary reinforced the sense that the movement itself was a serial production, self-aware and open-ended. By using repetition to signify endurance, activists converted serial aesthetics into a political statement: the persistence of the form mirrored the persistence of dissent.

Transnational seriality and diasporic mediation

Another notable finding is that the serial logic of Iranian activism

transcended national borders. Iranian diaspora communities – particularly in Europe and North America – acted as relay nodes sustaining the serial chain when domestic internet access was restricted. Hamid Naficy's (2011) theory of accented media provides a useful frame here: exilic and diasporic producers generate hybrid cultural forms that bridge home and host contexts. Diasporic activists reposted videos, subtitled Persian clips in English, and created new instalments tailored for Western audiences, effectively extending the narrative into global discourse.

This transnational seriality performed dual functions. It maintained pressure on international media cycles, ensuring that the Iranian protests did not fade after the first surge of attention – a common fate for global news events. And it allowed cultural translation: by repeating the same slogan in multiple languages, activists produced what Lila Abu-Lughod (2005) would describe as mediated solidarity, a sense of shared narrative ownership across cultural boundaries.

At the same time, the reliance on platform infrastructures like Twitter and Instagram introduced inequalities of visibility shaped by algorithmic governance. Posts from diasporic hubs often received more exposure than those from within Iran, creating asymmetries of representation. Yet, even these disparities underscore seriality's adaptive potential: activists within Iran adopted diasporic posts as reference points, remaking them with local footage or Persian captions, thereby re-localising the global series.

Seriality as performative endurance under repression

Beyond narrative and participation, seriality functioned as a performative declaration of endurance. Every new post restated the movement's existence, defying state narratives that sought to declare the protests "over." This aligns with Zeynep Tufekci's (2017) argument that digitally networked movements compensate for their lack of central organisation by performing visibility through constant signalling. The Iranian case, however, extends this logic: repetition itself becomes performance, and continuity becomes resistance.

As the regime alternated between violent repression and information blackout, the reappearance of familiar formats – hashtags, slogans, and song

fragments – did not signal redundancy, but resilience. Each recurring post reactivated a chain of memory and belonging, reaffirming presence and inviting renewed participation. Seriality thus operated as a ritual of persistence: by repeating the same phrases, images, and narratives, activists enacted a collective commitment to endurance and sustained political hope in the face of erasure.

This process also reflects Judith Butler's (2015) notion of performative assembly, in which the repeated enactment of presence constitutes political existence. Digital seriality embodies this logic online: through continuous production, participants collectively perform the being-together of protest even when physical assembly becomes impossible. In parallel, the movement illustrates what Kelleter (2017) describes as "serial agency", the capacity of serial forms to act beyond individual authorship through collaborative iteration. The protest series was collectively authored, open-ended, and self-perpetuating; its narrative structure mirrored its political organisation as decentralised, rhythmic, and indefinitely extensible.

Under authoritarian conditions, where silence is enforced and memory is systematically policed, seriality emerged as an infrastructure of endurance and a counter-hegemonic technology of visibility. Keeping a story alive episode by episode became both an act of survival and an act of defiance. In this sense, seriality did not merely represent resistance; it enacted it. It functioned as the grammar of protest in digital form, a mode of expression through which telling and enduring became inseparable.

Serial communication and the politics of form

Situating Iranian digital activism within the logic of serial communication contributes to broader debates about how media form structures political practice. Scholars of digital culture increasingly argue that media affordances shape not only what can be said, but how political life itself is organised (Couldry, Hepp 2016; van Dijck, Poell 2013). The Iranian case demonstrates that form is not neutral: serial structures influence the temporalities, affects, and collectives that constitute resistance.

In practical terms, seriality organised three layers of political practice. First,

it provided temporal infrastructure, synchronising dispersed actions across moments of connectivity and silence. Second, it enabled affective coordination, allowing users to feel part of an ongoing story. Third, it established archival accumulation, turning everyday posts into evidence for global audiences. These three layers reveal how formal properties of media – rhythm, repetition, linkage – can themselves become political tactics.

This finding bridges a gap between cultural theory and political communication. Where traditional political analysis often focuses on ideology or mobilisation, a formalist lens reveals the material and temporal conditions under which resistance persists. Seriality, then, is not merely a representation of struggle; it is the struggle's communicative form. It operationalises dissent as process – ongoing, unfinished, and self-renewing.

Reframing media form as political practice

What we have presented above shows how the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement mobilised the logic of seriality as both a storytelling method and a political infrastructure. In the fragmented, surveilled, and censored media ecology of Iran, serial communication emerged as a technique of survival – a form that enabled continuity despite disruption and collectivity despite dispersal. This section situates those findings within broader debates on the relationship between media form and political practice. It argues that seriality performs a dual function in digital protest: it is simultaneously a narrative strategy that organises meaning through repetition and progression, and a mode of collective resistance that materialises endurance under authoritarian conditions.

Scholars of media theory have long insisted that form is never neutral. From Raymond Williams's classic cultural materialism (1974) to Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp's quite recent work on deep mediatisation (2016), media forms are understood as social infrastructures that configure human action. Within this tradition, the Iranian case extends the idea that form is political – not merely in what it communicates, but in how it enables agency under constraint. Seriality, in this sense, is not a surface aesthetic borrowed from entertainment but a procedural

logic through which publics assemble and persist.

In seriality, meaning emerges through the rhythm of instalments, the deferred resolution, and the invitation to sustained engagement. Iranian protesters appropriated this temporal architecture for political ends: they replaced narrative suspense with suspense of survival – the expectation that despite repression, the story continues. The "next episode" became not a narrative luxury but a moral imperative (Mittell 2018). Every repost, chant, or replicated image functioned as the next instalment in a collective series whose authorship was distributed among thousands. Thus, what Kelleter terms "serial agency" took on a literal political dimension: the capacity of repetition itself to act (Kelleter 2017).

This shift invites rethinking of media power under authoritarianism. If media infrastructures shape the conditions of the social, then reappropriating those infrastructures – using the same temporal scaffolds to narrate resistance – constitutes a form of counter-construction of reality. Protesters do not merely occupy digital space; they reformat time, insisting that their story cannot be concluded by decree.

Seriality, participation, and affective publics

The Iranian movement challenges dominant models of participation in networked activism by revealing how engagement operates under repression not as continuous interaction, but as episodic and rhythmic contribution. While theories of participatory culture and affective publics, as formulated by Jenkins (2006) and Papacharissi (2015), emphasise narrative co-creation and emotional alignment within relatively open communication environments, the Iranian case demonstrates that participation under authoritarianism takes a different form: it becomes a matter of joining a sequence rather than sustaining dialogue. The repetition of hashtags such as #WomanLifeFreedom and #MahsaAmini transformed participation into a serial act, in which each repost, image, or textual variation functioned as a declaration of presence and perseverance. Emotion became inseparable from risk, and seriality lowered the threshold for involvement by allowing individuals to contribute through discreet, modular gestures rather than overt affiliation.

In parallel, this serial structure also reconfigured political memory. Drawing on Assmann's (2011) conception of digital memory as processual and connective, the Iranian protest demonstrates how repetition itself can function as remembrance. Each iteration of a hashtag or visual motif reinstituted the event into collective consciousness, countering what Dabashi (2016) describes as the ephemeral visibility that often characterises Middle Eastern dissent. Through serial participation, users enacted a form of postmemory, as theorised by Hirsch (2012), whereby individuals entered the narrative retroactively by repeating its elements rather than witnessing its origin. In this sense, seriality operated as both a choreography of assembly (Gerbaudo 2012) and an architecture of belonging (Papacharissi 2015): even when posts were removed and accounts disappeared, the ongoing rhythm of recurrence conveyed continuity. Under such conditions, memory ceased to rely on permanence and instead became agile, sustained through iteration rather than monumentality. Seriality thus emerged not merely as a communicative technique, but as a temporal politics of survival, transforming uncertainty into rhythm and dispersed participation into political presence (Butler 2015; Rancière 2010).

Authoritarian mediation and counter-form

The Iranian case also illuminates how digital resistance interacts with authoritarian media regimes that understand, and attempt to appropriate, serial logic for themselves. The Islamic Republic has long exploited serial television and propaganda series to craft ideological continuity (Abu-Lughod 2005; Naficy 2011). In that sense, seriality has historically served the state as a tool of nation-building. What distinguishes the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement is its counter-appropriation of that very logic.

Activists turned state seriality inside out: instead of producing unity through repetition of official symbols, they generated diversity through repetition of dissident forms. This subversion exposes what is called the reflexivity of popular seriality – the tendency of serial forms to reflect on their own conditions of production (Kelleter 2017). By parodying or reworking state imagery, protesters revealed the instability of the regime's narrative monopoly.

Authoritarian systems attempt to manage time through censorship and rhythm control: they seek to dictate when stories end. Serial protest resists precisely that control. By refusing closure, it denies the regime the satisfaction of narrative finality. In doing so, Iranian activists join a broader historical lineage of what Nacim Pak-Shiraz (2022) describes as Iranian cinematic poetics of delay, where unresolved temporality signals defiance. Serial activism thus extends aesthetic resistance into the digital sphere.

Global resonances and comparative implications

While rooted in Iran, the findings speak to global transformations in digital activism. Movements from Hong Kong's 2019 protests to Chile's feminist mobilisations and the #BlackLivesMatter network rely on similar serial mechanisms: repeating hashtags, periodic updates, ritualised anniversaries. These practices confirm the observation that networked movements depend on visibility loops rather than hierarchical organisation (Tufekci 2017). What the Iranian case adds is an explicit articulation of seriality as the logic that sustains those loops.

Across contexts, serial communication transforms the political act from singular eruption into iterative process. It redefines protest as ongoing rather than evental. This resonates with Arjun Appadurai's (2013) concept of mediascapes, where global flows of imagery produce new imaginaries of community. The #WomanLifeFreedom narrative circulated within these mediascapes as an open series inviting cross-cultural continuation. Feminist groups in Turkey, Afghanistan, and Latin America replicated its templates, extending the serial chain and embedding Iranian dissent within a planetary archive of gendered resistance.

This transnational uptake complicates assumptions about centre and periphery in digital culture. Instead of diffusion from the Global North, the Iranian seriality demonstrates what is called "reverse innovation" – activists in constrained environments developing communicative strategies later adopted elsewhere (Madianou 2019). Serial protest, born of repression, becomes a global vocabulary of persistence.

Media infrastructures and the materiality of serial resistance

A further implication of the Iranian case concerns digital infrastructure and its political appropriation. Following Parks and Starosielski's (2015) call to attend to the material underpinnings of digital communication – servers, cables, platforms, and algorithms – it becomes evident that serial protest functioned not only as expression but as infrastructural practice. Activists tactically exploited platform affordances such as Twitter threads, Instagram carousels, and TikTok stitching to maintain continuity, while simultaneously confronting infrastructural fragility in the form of shutdowns, filtering, and bandwidth throttling. The repeated circulation of identical content across multiple accounts operated as redundancy, compensating for technical instability and censorship. In this sense, seriality enacted what Larkin (2013) conceptualises as an aesthetic of repair: the creative reappropriation of damaged or unstable systems to make circulation possible under adverse conditions.

Understanding serial activism as an infrastructural and temporal form also reframes how resistance itself is theorised. Rather than relying on notions of rupture and spectacle, serial protest privileges accumulation, rhythm, and endurance. Its political force lies not in singular moments of visibility, but in temporal persistence. This challenges political science to reconsider power as a struggle over time, in which authoritarian regimes enforce forgetting while protesters counter through repetition and recall. It also expands media theory by repositioning seriality from an entertainment logic to a political technology of temporality, in which form itself structures resistance.

In the Iranian context, where narrative closure frequently coincides with state propaganda, the refusal to conclude becomes a radical gesture. Each new post asserts continuity and resists erasure. Seriality thus operates both as material labour and symbolic stance: as users repurpose commercial platforms for political ends, they engage in what Fuchs (2014) terms digital labour of resistance, transforming infrastructural constraints into instruments of expression. As Fatemeh Shams (2016; 2023) observes, this logic resonates with a broader Persian poetic tradition in which repetition is not redundancy but moral endurance. Serial protest, therefore, does not merely deploy technology; it inherits a cultural

aesthetics in which persistence itself becomes a political value.

Conclusion

This research has argued that Iranian digital activism, particularly during the "Women, Life, Freedom" uprising, exemplifies how seriality functions not only as a mode of storytelling but also as an operational form of collective resistance. By analysing the recurring structures, rhythms, and narrative patterns that protesters employed across Twitter/X, Instagram, and TikTok, the study shown that serial communication transforms digital protest from a sequence of isolated expressions into a coherent, cumulative, and self-renewing narrative. In doing so, it illuminated the deep entanglement between media form and political practice under authoritarian conditions.

Seriality served three interdependent functions throughout this movement. First, it created temporal continuity, transforming fragmented actions into episodes of a long narrative arc that survived interruptions such as internet shutdowns or mass arrests. Second, it fostered participatory engagement, enabling users to enter the movement by replicating or remixing familiar formats that guaranteed recognisability and coherence. Third, it built a cumulative archive of dissent, a redundant network of posts and videos that resisted censorship through multiplicity and endurance. These functions, taken together, reveal seriality as both structure and strategy – a framework for sustaining political life when traditional forms of organisation are suppressed.

This conclusion extends beyond the Iranian case. It contributes to global debates in media and communication studies concerning how form mediates agency. As Couldry and Hepp (2016) argue, the social world is constructed through mediated operations that define the parameters of what can be seen, said, and remembered. By reappropriating the serial logics embedded in platform architectures, Iranian protesters redefined those parameters, asserting narrative control over their own visibility. The act of posting repeatedly became a way of reclaiming temporality from authoritarian closure, affirming that political presence persists even when bodies cannot assemble in public.

In theoretical terms, the study situates seriality within three overlapping

dimensions. It is, firstly, a narrative system that turns dispersed acts into linked episodes, constructing coherence through rhythm and repetition. Secondly, it is an affective infrastructure, translating emotional solidarity into continuous participation. And thirdly, it is an infrastructural strategy, leveraging redundancy and cross-platform circulation to safeguard memory. Recognising these interrelations allows scholars to move beyond content analysis towards understanding form itself as political.

For political communication research, this perspective reframes the study of activism under repression. Instead of viewing digital resistance as spontaneous bursts of outrage, the serial model foregrounds endurance, rhythm, and repetition as the core tactics of survival. Seriality provides a conceptual vocabulary for describing how publics build persistence over time through form rather than formal organisation.

At a cultural level, the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement reclaims a longstanding Persian aesthetic of continuity – the poetic cadence of reiteration found in ghazal, lament, and resistance verse (Shams 2016; 2023). Digital seriality thus connects technological modernity with cultural tradition, bridging oral, poetic, and visual modes of endurance. What emerges is not a rupture between old and new media but an evolution of a national expressive habit into the networked age.

The limitations of this inquiry – particularly the reliance on publicly visible data and the impossibility of accessing in-country participants – should not overshadow its broader insight: that political endurance can be formalised through media structures. Future research might extend this framework through longitudinal studies of how serial protest narratives evolve over years, or comparative analyses across cultural contexts to explore whether similar logics appear in other movements of sustained dissent.

Ultimately, what the Iranian uprising reveals is that resistance today is serial. In a world where authoritarian regimes weaponise time – erasing events, rewriting timelines, and declaring closure – activists reclaim time by dividing it into episodes that never fully end. Each post, each repetition of "Woman, Life, Freedom," performs the unfinished work of freedom. Seriality becomes a

temporal politics of hope, where every recurrence affirms continuity against disappearance.

As media theorists remind us, the politics of visibility is inseparable from the politics of form. The Iranian protesters' strategic use of serial communication demonstrates that even within the architecture of global platforms designed for entertainment and consumption, alternative narratives of endurance can emerge. Their digital series of dissent compels scholars to reconsider not only what activism looks like, but how it unfolds in time. Seriality, once the language of fiction, has become the rhythm of political reality – a living script through which people narrate, remember, and resist together.

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