Forming an affective public online: Aggressive posts and comments in the My Stealthy Freedom movement
by Farinaz Basmechi and Gabe Ignatow

Abstract
We use social psychology research on emotional selection of information to model how social movements use social media in the formation of affective publics and apply our model to Instagram post data from the My Stealthy Freedom anti-mandatory hijab movement in Iran. Thematic analysis applied to samples of posts and comments revealed six main themes, one of which, aggression, includes three subthemes related to verbal aggression and physical violence. As the level of aggression increased in Instagram videos, the level of aggression in the comments increased as well, and videos containing verbal aggression and physical violence had more likes and comments than did non-aggressive and non-violent videos. We discuss implications of these findings for research on social movements and the formation of affective publics.

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I. Affective publics and social movements
Affective publics (Papacharissi, 2016, 2014), and related concepts such as digital affect cultures (Döveling, et al., 2018) and affective communities (Ahn, 2019), refer to publics that affectively engage with politics on a variety of digital platforms. Social movements that mobilize via social media involve the formation of affective publics, which are produced and re-produced by “accumulating and imbricated digital layers of expression” [1], affective traces that persist and may produce feelings of community [2] that bind publics long after the occurrence of the events that called them into being. One example of the formation of an
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Affective public is the 2010 Arab Spring, which was initiated after the release of streaming video of the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, a young vegetable merchant who stepped in front of a municipal building in Tunisia and set himself on fire in protest of the government. His suicide was “one of several stories told and retold on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube in ways that inspired dissidents to organize protests, criticize their governments, and spread ideas about democracy” (Howard and Hussain, 2013). There are countless other examples of how social media platforms serve as conduits for affective expression in historical moments that promise social change (Mundt, et al., 2018) by easing the process of spreading information as well as expanding the number of potential activists (Christensen, 2011). In doing so, social media “do not make or break revolutions, but they do lend emerging publics their own distinct mediality ... [which] shapes the texture of these publics and affect becomes the drive that keeps them going” [3].

The communications and media studies literatures on affective publics and related concepts is growing rapidly. Beckett and Deuze (2016) discuss how emotion is becoming a much more important dynamic in how news is produced and consumed online. Beckett and Deuze survey strategies and tools for the analysis of “affective news” and the “sociology of influence when power is redistributed emotionally.” Gerbaudo (2016) discusses how activists used Facebook in the 2011 movements of the Egyptian revolution, and how the Spanish Indignados Activists’ Facebook pages saw exponential growth in user engagement in proximity to key protest events, signaled by spikes in likes and comments on activists’ pages. These spikes represented an emotional dialogue between admins and users that generated a “process of emotional contagion that helped establish propitious psychological conditions for mass protest participation” [4].

An aspect of affective publics that is not well understood is their micro-level dynamics. How are they initially formed? What are the forms of video and text content that produce engagement and feelings of community? In this study we draw from research on the emotional selection of information from social psychology to model the formation of affective publics as a process of content selection based in part on affect, and demonstrate the viability of our model with a thematic analysis of a sample of Instagram posts and comments from the My Stealthy Freedom anti-mandatory hijab movement in Iran. We find that in addition to the social network factors identified in previous research on affective publics, affect expressed in online content itself predicts content popularity.

Six main themes emerged from our initial analysis: national politics and the economy, religion, social control, freedom, Masih Alinejad (the founder of the My Stealthy Freedom movement), and aggression. Because we are interested in sentiment in affective publics and the interrelations between affect and social movement mobilization, we focused on the aggression theme, which was the only theme that could be categorized as fundamentally affective. That is, while affective language was found in some of the videos and content that included the other five themes, affective language was only rarely and inconsistently associated with these other themes. Analysis of 200 Instagram (IG) posts and captions found that as the level of aggression increased in videos, the level of aggression in the comments increased as well, and videos containing verbal aggression and physical violence had more likes and comments than did videos without verbal aggression or physical violence. However, aggression in the captions did not have the same effect. We consider possible implications of these findings for research on social movements and the formation of affective publics. We suggest that, in combination, our methods and findings demonstrate new ways to conceptualize and measure the interrelations between affect and mobilization in social movements’ early stages.

II. Social movements, emotions, and social media

Social movement activists aim to create or preserve spaces of autonomy in which to enact new relationships and lifestyles to pose a challenge to the normalizing system of power. Activists want to increase public awareness and change people’s opinions about a subject. Because emotions play the role of connecting people with one another and the world around them, emotions can color individuals’ thoughts, judgments,
and actions. Elicitation of strong emotion has been used in various social movements to gain attention and attract more people to join the movements (Goodwin, et al., 2000; Polletta and Jasper, 2001).

As Scheff (2019) has pointed out, emotions can work as motivators of actions when they are directly connected to moral sensibilities such as shame, guilt, and pride. Emotions can also help channel action when they remind audiences of familiar situations, or when they elicit compassion. Positive and negative emotions pervade all social life, including social movements; without emotions, there might be no social action at all (Jasper, 2018). Jasper (2018) has identified some emotions potentially relevant to social movements protests, including primarily affective emotions like hatred, hostility, loathing, love, solidarity, loyalty, suspicious, trust, and respect; primarily reactive emotions like anger, grief, outrage, and shame; and moods and others in between such as sympathy, cynicism, defiance, enthusiasm, envy, resentment, fear, dread, joy, hope, and resignation (Jasper, 1998).

Online movements also may use emotions to propagate ideas, ideologies, and identities to motivate individuals to act in the movement. Online movement participants and organizers appeal to and build upon pre-existing emotions such as outrage and fear. Some of the emotions are temporary responses to specific events and others might form longer-lasting affective ties. Online movements deploy various new technologies provided in social media such as sharing visual and textual contents publicly to not only do advertise their purposes but also motivate more individuals to join and support their movement.

Approaching social movements as visual phenomena has not been at the center of attention of scholarly interest for many years. But recently several social scientists have studied social movements’ visual aspects alongside their textual sources (Arda, 2014; Askanius, 2019, 2012; Cornet, et al., 2017; Doerr, et al., 2015, 2013; Gleason, 2013; Mattoni and Teune, 2014). Social media has been used as a tool to build community relationships, challenge dominant narratives, and create social change (Canella, 2017). Online movement media play a role in complex sociotechnical institutions via the proliferation of camera-enabled social media platforms and smartphones. New technology simplifies the production and amplifies the distribution of videos, images, and texts which present the movement’s main claims as well as picturing injustice context to motivate people to join (Downing, 2008).

For social movements’ leaders and participants alike, it is very important to draw attention to their movement. Social movements thus use different mechanisms to “enhance the visibility and symbolic power of social movement-related information” (Wang, et al., 2016) to become viral and construct a pluralistic bloc for resistance (Arda, 2014).

III. Emotional selection of information

In order to specify the role of affect in the popularity of social movement-related online content, we borrow theory and methods from the social psychology of cultural diffusion (Heat, et al., 2001) and also from web memetics (Ignatow and Williams, 2011; Nahon and Hemsley, 2013; Shifman, 2013, 2012). Social psychologists have studied information diffusion in terms of two selection processes: informational selection, which involves selection of content based on truth or a moral lesson; and emotional selection, which involves selection based on evocation of emotions like anger, fear, or disgust. Focusing on disgust emotions, Heath, et al. (2001) found that people were more willing to pass along stories that elicited stronger disgust and to pass along the versions of stories that produced the highest level of disgust. They also found that stories with disgust motifs were distributed more widely on urban legend Web sites [5]. Guadagno, et al., (2013) ask what qualities lead some Internet videos to gain popularity over others. They examined the role of emotional response and video source on the likelihood of spreading an Internet video by first validating the emotional response to the video and then investigating the underlying mechanisms. Their main findings were that people reporting strong affective responses to a video reported greater intent to spread the video, and that videos that produced anger were more likely to be forwarded but only when
the source of the video was an out-group member.

For Web memeticists, memes are pieces of digital content that spread quickly around the Web in various iterations and become a shared cultural experience. Shifman has analyzed well-known Internet memes including “LOLCats” and Occupy Wall Street’s “We Are the 99 Percent.” Analyzing what makes memes successful, she focuses on characteristics of the memes themselves. For instance, in a study of 30 popular YouTube videos (visual memes), Shifman (2012) found six common features of the videos: a focus on ordinary people, flawed masculinity, humor, simplicity, repetitiveness, and whimsical content (Shifman, 2012; see also Milner, 2016; Phillips, 2015). Ignatow and Williams (2011) analyzed the rapid diffusion of the “anchor baby” text meme, focusing less on the characteristics of the meme itself and more on the news media outlets through which it passed on its path from the margins to the center of the news media ecosystem.

Social psychology and Web memetics both find evidence that affective digital content is more popular and/or contagious than is content that contains information or moral lessons with minimal emotional resonance. Based on these findings, we ask whether emotional selection on online platforms conditions the formation of affective publics. Our specific goal is to examine the relationship between aggression in online videos related to a social movement, aggression in videos’ comments sections, and the popularity (likes and shares) of videos.

IV. My Stealthy Freedom and White Wednesdays

The hijab (female head covering) has long been a contested symbol in Iran. In 1979, when the Islamic Revolution took place and the first theocratic republic government in the world was formed (Wuthnow, 2007), wearing the hijab became one of the most important issues. The Islamic revolution was thus turning into a sexual counter-revolution, a struggle over women’s sexuality. On 29 March 1979, Khomeini (the leader of Iran at the time) announced gender segregation of all beaches and sports activities, and three days later, he required all women to wear the Islamic hijab at work. When the notion of wearing the hijab as mandatory for all women was presented by the leader of the Islamic revolution, Khomeini, hundreds of thousands of women marched in the streets to protest against the new compulsory hijab law which wanted to force women who participated through the process of revolution without wearing a hijab to wear a veil. The protest took place on International Women’s Day. Many women took to the public sphere and asked for their rights, using slogans such as “freedom is neither eastern nor western, it is universal” and “we did not make a revolution to go backward” (Shojaee, 2009). There were encounters between religious women and men in favor of the mandatory hijab law and women who disagreed with the law.

Despite these protests, wearing the hijab was made mandatory for all women while in public in 1983 by the Islamic regime. However, in recent years social media platforms have given opponents of mandatory hijab laws new opportunities for networking and mobilizing (Dehghan, 2015; Hajin, 2013).

One of the most recent social movements against the mandatory hijab is My Stealthy Freedom (MSF), an online movement started in 2014 by Masih Alinejad, an Iranian-born journalist and activist based in the United States. The movement started from a Facebook page where women from Iran posted photos of themselves without hijabs. By the end of 2016 the page has surpassed one million likes. The main goal of MSF was to promote the actions of women struggling for their rights in Iran and against compulsory hijab laws that mandate that all women in Iran wear the hijab while in public. Although the movement’s founder uses different online platform like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, in this paper we focused on her Instagram page since the other two platforms were formally banned by the Iranian government after the protest movement during the 2009 election. While Iranians still find ways to use these social media, users do not have unlimited access to their content (Mueller and van Huellen, 2012).
One of the campaigns launched within the MSF movement is #WhiteWednesdays (WW), which is an online campaign that has invited women in Iran to wear a white hijab every Wednesday as a form of protest. In the White Wednesdays campaign, participants send their pictures while wearing or holding white symbols to Masih Alinejad to show their disagreement with the mandatory hijab laws and she shares their posts on her Facebook and Instagram pages (see Khazraee and Novak, 2018; Nasehi, 2017; Stewart and Schultze, 2019). The #WhiteWednesdays campaign is a turning point in the MSF movement since before this campaign freedom was defined in terms of stealthiness, based on what can be inferred from the movement’s name My Stealthy Freedom. However, by launching WW, Alinejad motivated participants to act freely in the movement and show their disagreement with compulsory laws by wearing a white scarf or holding a white symbol on Wednesdays. With this shift, Alinejad stopped using the hashtag #MyStealthyFreedom, which was the very first hashtag she used in this movement. Existing research on MSF has primarily focused on the ways that the movement’s followers use captions, videos, and photos to negotiate discourse of risk and freedom and make sense of their experienced gender oppression, articulate a collective identity, and represent their bodies (Khazraee and Novak, 2018; Koo, 2016; Novak and Khazraee, 2014; Stewart and Schultze, 2017).

V. Data

Our first step was to manually collect 20 MSF Instagram posts between August 2014 and October 2018 by sampling every seventh post that included the hashtag #WhiteWednesdays during this period, to conduct our initial thematic analysis. We also analyzed the total of 200 comments along with our initial thematic analysis, included every seventh comment beginning with the first comment related to each of the six main posts (the number seven was produced by a random number generator) until we reached a total of 10 comments for each post. All the posts and captions analyzed in this study were in Persian. For the quantitative section of this paper, 200 posts, caption, and numbers of likes and comments for each of the posts, were collected using Python. We coded the posts and captions in terms of their aggression in MS Excel. Treating aggression as dummy variable, we assigned one to the posts and captions that contains aggressive content and zero to the ones that contained non-aggressive content. Using SPSS, we conduct our analysis on the data to find the relationship between the level of aggression in the main posts and captions and their popularity.

VI. Thematic analysis

We conducted an exploratory thematic analysis on a random sample of 20 posts and comments to find the most important and repeated themes. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns of themes within text corpora. At a minimum, it involves organizing and describing texts in detail, but can go further than organization and description by allowing for interpretation of various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). Thematic analysis starts when the researcher notices patterns of meaning in a collection of texts, either during the process of acquiring texts or soon after. The endpoint is the reporting of the content and meaning of the patterns of themes in the corpus. While thematic analysis allows researchers to interpret overarching themes and subthemes in texts, it does not allow them to make claims about language use in situ, the “fine-grained functionality of talk” (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Our initial inductive coding of the first sample of 20 Instagram posts revealed six themes: national politics and the economy; religion; social control; freedom; Alinejad (the founder of the MSF movement); and, aggression. The first theme found in thematic analysis is national politics and the economy. This theme includes discussion of the problematic political and economic situation in Iran, mostly related to
unemployment and national politicians.

The second theme is religion which includes discussion of Islam as it relates to the hijab, as well as discussion of commenters’ religious beliefs. Posts and comments with this theme often mentioned that the hijab is not mandatory according to Islamic religious laws. The third theme found in the thematic analysis is social control. This theme includes discussion of a need for societies to impose boundaries on the behavior of ordinary people and includes sub-themes of dictatorship and oppression. Freedom is the fourth theme that includes discussion of freedom of choice in lifestyle and dress arguing that the hijab should not be controlled by the government or by laws since wearing it is a matter of personal choice. Masih Alinejad, the founder of MSF and #WW was herself a major theme in the Instagram posts and comments. Examples of this theme include Instagram posts by people who are in favor of #WW praising Alinejad because of her efforts to fight against the mandatory hijab. Other examples are posters and commenters who are against #WW blaming her for the chaos in Iranian society.

Aggressive language and violence is the most important themes that shows itself in thematic analysis. In order to more fully comprehend the mechanism of usage of aggression in the posts, captions, and comments the second sample of Instagram posts and comments was strategically selected to include three categories of aggressive language: low, medium, and high aggression.

**Low aggression**

Low aggression posts and comments included videos that contained shouting. There were several low aggression subthemes, including Profanity, Danger, Loud Voice, Threat, Fear, Force, and Cry (see Tables 1 and 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Low-aggression subthemes.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PROFANITY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DANGER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOUD VOICE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THREAT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Force</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


FORCE
context especially about life style or
ways of dressing like wearing the
compulsory hijab by force.

CRY
because the police was teasing the
woman in the video the girl was
crying/ because of showing the
video to the interviewee they cry)

Table 2: Examples of low-aggression posts and
comments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anti-White Wednesdays posts and comments</th>
<th>Pro-White Wednesdays posts and comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Damn on your parents which grew you rabid black crows”</td>
<td>“Bastard animal”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The campaign of Masih is disgusting”</td>
<td>“Shame on the dishonorable men. They did not stop the bastard police. God damn them”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Obsessed, rabid, IS, shit Muslims”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Medium aggression**

Posts and comments that included discussion of physical aggression but no video of physical aggression were coded as medium aggression. Examples included discussion of death, imprisonment, and sexual assault. Medium aggression subthemes included verbal references to Death and Sexual Assault (see Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3: Medium-aggression subthemes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEATH</th>
<th>Mentioning death in the comments or conversations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SEXUAL ASSAULT</td>
<td>Using Sexual Assault (verbal or physical) in the comments or mentioning sexual assault in their experiences/Sexual assault is sexual contact or behavior without the agreement of the survivor.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: Examples of medium-aggression posts and comments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anti-White Wednesdays posts and comments</th>
<th>Pro-White Wednesdays posts and comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Masih I want to fuck your ass.”</td>
<td>“showing the pictures of these bastards is not enough. I like to see their chopped head”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“They should beat and kick out these bastards from the country”</td>
<td>“I wish a day that we kill all Basijies”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I wish I see you crying bastards”</td>
<td>“motherfucker bastard”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Obsessed bitch”</td>
<td>“I hope you are tortured by the worst pain in the world”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Fuck you veiled asshole woman. Bastard”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

High aggression

Posts coded as high aggression included video of sexual assault, physical violence, death, or imprisonment. There were several high aggression subthemes, including Physical Violence and Imprisonment (see Tables 5 and 6).

Table 5: High-aggression subthemes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHYSICAL VIOLENCE</th>
<th>Physical violence/Any use of physical force against oneself or other people with high probability of injury.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IMPRISONMENT</td>
<td>Imprisonment because of participation in the WW movement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Descriptions of pro-White Wednesdays
In one video the morality police wanted to arrest some girls because they were wearing the *hijab* improperly, but one of the friends of the arrested girls stood against the morality police car and did not let the car move. One of the officer accelerated and almost ran over the girl.

A girl who did not wear the *hijab* and hung her scarf on a piece of wood to show her disagreement with compulsory *hijab* laws was hit and thrown out from the place she was standing by the police.

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**VII. Quantitative analysis**

Analysis of the relationship between aggressive and non-aggressive Instagram posts and likes and comments, on a sample of 200 randomly collected MSF Instagram posts, revealed that videos with aggressive content had more likes and comments than videos without aggressive content. Pearson correlation and T-tests showed significant differences between means and medians for the two collections of posts, while standard deviations were similar (Table 7).

**Table 7: Likes and comments for non-aggressive and aggressive posts.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-aggressive post</th>
<th>Aggressive post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average likes</td>
<td>124,411</td>
<td>153,017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average comments</td>
<td>4,898</td>
<td>8,307</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the level of aggression increased in the videos, the level of aggression in the comments increased as well. Movement supporters generally responded to non-aggressive posts with non-aggressive comments. However, commenters who opposed *White Wednesdays* used more aggressive language in responding to non-aggressive posts than to posts with verbal aggression and physical violence. And in posts with verbal aggression and physical violence, aggressive language by opponents of *WW* was almost always directed at Masih Alinejad rather than at the victim of aggression or violence shown in the post (see Table 8 for examples).

**Table 8: Close reading of six aggressive posts and related comments.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video codes</th>
<th>Anti-<em>WW</em> comments</th>
<th>Pro-<em>WW</em> comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An independent samples t-test conducted to compare the number of like and comments in both aggressive and non-aggressive posts and captions shows there was a statistically significant difference in the number of likes for aggressive posts ($M=153016.7, SD=59672.8$) and non-aggressive posts ($M=124410.6, SD=59622.6$) conditions; $t(3.391), p=.001$. In addition, there was a significant difference in the number of comments for aggressive posts ($M=8307, SD=5981.1$) and non-aggressive posts ($M=4897.6, SD=4797.1$) conditions; $t(4.447), p=.001$. Since the standard deviation for aggressive and non-aggressive post were different, we used Glass’ Delta to report effect size. The effect size of the number of likes is 0.48 which is indicator of small difference and the number of comments shows effect size of 0.57 which is a medium effect size.

Running a t-test on the level of aggression in the captions and its relation to the number of posts and likes
revealed a statistically significant difference in the number of likes for aggressive posts ($M=130011$, $SD=48982.2$) and non-aggressive captions ($M=164821.6$, $SD=83597.6$) conditions; $t(-3.585)$, $p=.001$. No difference was found in the number of comments for aggressive captions (the effect size for the number of likes regarding the aggression in captions was 0.07).

VIII. Discussion and conclusions

This study’s main finding, that Instagram posts from the White Wednesdays movement that contained verbal and physical aggression were liked and commented on at higher rates than posts without aggressive content, is consistent with social psychological theories of emotional selection of information (Heath, et al., 2001). As discussed above, these theories suggest that people prefer, and remember better, information that includes emotional content. Our findings, while based on a small sample taken from a specific social movement context, is suggestive of new ways of theorizing and analyzing the formation of affective publics, including the application of techniques for statistical inference on data gathered with thematic analysis.

One limitation of this study was the comparatively small sample of analyzed posts, which was partly due to our choice of thematic analysis as our text analysis method. While thematic analysis has the advantage of allowing for nuanced and data-driven rather than theory-driven analysis, the use of other, more highly automated text mining methods (Ignatow and Mihalcea, 2017) such as opinion mining would allow for analysis of far larger data sets than the small IG sample used in the present study. Another limitation was that we did not analyze the popularity of the five themes that were not frequently or consistently concerned with affect, such as the themes of national politics and the economy or religion. Doing so would have been beyond beyond the scope of the present study, but not doing so limits our ability to contextualize our findings. While we do not know whether the emotional dynamics of information selection differ across themes within our sample, we also do not know of research that has found this to be the case using other historical cases.

Our findings suggest a number of new research questions: Since social movements have been recognized as “intentional action with the goal of bringing social change” (Klang and Madison, 2016) do MSF leader and participants intentionally post content containing verbal and physical aggression in order to increase comments and likes? Beyond a positive relationship between post aggression and comments and likes, are there other measurable qualities of Instagram posts that lead to sharing and commenting? Finally, what characteristics of the Instagram platform, such as post format, sharing algorithms, or comment moderation policies and practices, have affected the success of the MSF movement, #WW campaign, and other social movements that use the IG platform? While the sociology of algorithms (Bishop, 2019, 2018; Bucher, 2017, 2012; Kitchin, 2017) and of social media platforms (Gillespie, 2018, 2015; Gillespie, et al., 2014) are relatively new research areas, recent empirical sociological studies demonstrate that while algorithms in commercial software cannot be directly observed by researchers, they are not a ‘black box’ either, as there are now tools available for analyzing their informational and social dynamics. After all, social media platforms “don’t just guide, distort, and facilitate social activity — they also delete some of it. They don’t just link users together; they also suspend them. They don’t just circulate our images and posts, they also algorithmically promote some over others” [6]. Future mixed-method video- and text-based research on the relations between social media platform characteristics such as feed algorithms and moderation policies, affective content, and the formation and mobilization of affective publics could be valuable.

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Notes

5. See also Izard, 2009, p. 18.

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187–203.


Editorial history

Received 30 November 2020; revised 28 December 2020; accepted 30 December 2020.

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by Farinaz Basmechi and Gabe Ignatow.
First Monday, volume 26, number 3 (March 2021).
doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i3.11471