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The Role of Social Media in Shaping Public Opinion and Its Impact on Criminal Policy in Iran and Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, social media have emerged as one of the most influential factors affecting social behavior, crime representation, and the formation of public opinion, playing a dual role within the field of criminal policy. On the one hand, they function as tools for enhancing public awareness, preventing crime, and increasing social participation; on the other hand, they may contribute to the spread of rumors, the intensification of perceived insecurity, the facilitation of certain criminal behaviors, and the creation of artificial pressures on policymaking institutions. A comparative examination of the role of social media in Iran and Afghanistan demonstrates that, despite cultural similarities and closely related social structures, the two countries have experienced different trajectories in managing cyberspace and its influence on criminalization processes and criminal policy development. Iran, benefiting from a relatively coherent legal system and specialized institutions such as the Cyber Police (FATA Police), has pursued an approach based on controlled criminalization and regulatory governance of media environments. In contrast, Afghanistan—particularly following recent political transformations—has faced challenges including the absence of stable legal mechanisms, institutional fragility, and the exploitation of social media platforms by extremist groups. Employing a descriptive–analytical approach and drawing upon criminological and communication theories, this study examines the impact of social media on behavioral patterns, norm formation, criminal policy processes, and criminalization practices in both countries. The findings indicate that while social media create significant opportunities for transparency and social oversight, in the absence of effective legal frameworks they may also become drivers of instability, transformation of crime patterns, and intensified public opinion pressure on penal decision-making. The study concludes by proposing recommendations for improving criminal policymaking in both jurisdictions.

Keywords: *Social media; Criminalization; Criminal policy; Iran; Afghanistan; Public opinion; Cyberspace; Crime prevention.*

Introduction

In recent decades, social media have evolved into one of the fundamental phenomena shaping the human lifeworld, transforming not only patterns of communication and information exchange but also influencing the formation of public opinion, political orientations, and even the legal and criminal structures of societies. With their unprecedented speed, reach, and influence, social networking platforms have blurred the boundary between information producers and consumers, creating new arenas for social interaction, narrative construction, and the



representation of events. This transformation has affected criminal policymaking more than almost any other domain, since public perceptions of crime, security, justice, and the necessity of criminalization are now largely constructed within the media sphere (1, 2).

Within this context, the media no longer function merely as reporters of crime but rather as active social actors. Through agenda-setting, amplification of particular behaviors, stimulation of insecurity perceptions, imitation dynamics, and the dissemination of rumors or misinformation, media environments may directly or indirectly influence crime rates, the nature of penal responses, and the prioritization of criminal policies. At the same time, social media provide important opportunities, including increased public awareness, social oversight, transparency, civic engagement, and participation in crime prevention processes (3, 4). This dual character extends beyond theoretical debate and manifests differently across national contexts, particularly in countries such as Iran and Afghanistan, which share cultural and social similarities while operating under distinct political structures and legal systems (5, 6).

Iran, benefiting from a comparatively coherent legal framework and specialized institutions such as the Cyber Police, has in recent years sought to regulate cyberspace through the criminalization of certain online behaviors and the control of harmful digital content in order to maintain cyber order and informational security. Legislative instruments such as the Computer Crimes Law and subsequent cyber regulations demonstrate attempts to institutionalize legal governance over digital environments (7-9). In contrast, Afghanistan—particularly following recent political developments—has faced broader institutional challenges, legal fragmentation, and cultural complexities in addressing the impact of social media. In this setting, digital platforms have simultaneously served as mechanisms for public awareness and civic participation while also facilitating rumor dissemination, violence mobilization, and extremist communication networks (10-12).

Given the growing importance of social media in shaping public opinion and influencing criminalization processes, the present study adopts media, criminological, and legal theoretical perspectives to conduct a comparative analysis of the role of social media in Iran and Afghanistan. The research seeks to clarify how social media transform behavioral norms, facilitate or restrain criminal conduct, and how legal mechanisms have been developed in both countries to regulate digital spaces. Accordingly, the study analyzes both the positive and negative impacts of social media on criminal policy while examining similarities and differences between the two legal systems and proposing approaches for strengthening efficient and human-rights-oriented criminal policymaking.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Media Theories and Models

Media theories emphasize the central role of media institutions in shaping public perceptions of crime. Agenda-setting and framing theories demonstrate that media not only influence what people think about but also how they think about particular issues. From the perspective of uses-and-gratifications theory, audiences actively select media content according to psychological and informational needs, fulfilling motivational demands through mediated communication processes (1). Script theory further suggests that media exposure may construct behavioral scenarios or cognitive scripts—especially among young audiences—that can later be activated when individuals encounter similar real-life situations (2).

Criminological Theories Related to Media

Social Learning and Imitation. Social learning perspectives assume that individuals, particularly children and adolescents, may observe and imitate behaviors displayed in media environments, including violent acts or methods of committing crime. Observational learning processes demonstrate that exposure to rewarded or successful criminal models can facilitate behavioral acquisition. Differential association theory likewise highlights that behavioral patterns are learned through interaction and exposure to favorable definitions toward deviant conduct (10, 13).

Arousal Theory. According to arousal theory, exposure to violent or emotionally stimulating media content—such as violent films, aggressive video games, or sensational crime news—may elevate physiological and emotional arousal levels, thereby increasing the short-term likelihood of impulsive or aggressive behavior (2).

Cultivation Theory. Cultivation theory maintains that long-term and repeated exposure to violence-oriented media gradually shapes individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of social reality. Continuous exposure to mediated violence may generate a perception of the world as dangerous, increase fear of crime, and in some cases normalize violent responses to social problems (3).

Desensitization Theory. Desensitization theory posits that repeated exposure to violent imagery and criminal scenes reduces emotional and physiological responses such as empathy, fear, or moral repulsion toward violence. Over time, this emotional numbing may increase tolerance for violent conduct and reduce psychological barriers against aggression (2).

Legal Theories

Utilitarian Theory. Utilitarian perspectives argue that criminalization should maximize social welfare; behavior ought to be criminalized only when the societal harm of non-criminalization outweighs the benefits of freedom. Punishment must therefore be structured to achieve optimal deterrence while minimizing social harm (14).

Theory of Criminal Justice. This theory emphasizes proportionality between crime and punishment. Penal responses should reflect fairness and reciprocity, functioning as a legitimate societal reaction aimed at maintaining social order (15).

Social Defense Theory. Social defense approaches prioritize crime prevention and collective security. From this perspective, criminalization may extend even to behaviors that have not yet caused direct harm but pose foreseeable risks to social safety (16).

Liberal Theory. Liberal legal thought stresses individual liberty and limits on state authority. Criminalization should therefore be restricted to conduct that directly infringes upon the rights and freedoms of others, avoiding penal intervention in purely self-regarding behavior (17).

Critical Criminology. Critical criminology views criminalization as influenced by social, economic, and political power structures. According to this perspective, criminal laws may reflect dominant group interests, while structural inequalities play a central role in the production of crime and deviance (11).

Interactionist Theory. Interactionism analyzes how definitions of crime and punishment emerge through social interaction. Crime is understood as a relative and socially constructed phenomenon, varying across societies and shaped by collective interpretations and labeling processes (15).

Social Control Theory. Social control theory assumes that individuals possess inherent tendencies toward deviance, which are restrained through social bonds, commitment to shared values, and participation in social institutions. Criminalization functions as a mechanism reinforcing social control structures and reducing deviant motivation (13).

Labeling Theory. Labeling theory emphasizes that designating an individual as a criminal may transform personal identity and increase the likelihood of continued deviance. Preventing stigmatization and facilitating reintegration into society therefore constitute essential components of modern criminal policy (15).

Analysis of the Impact of Social Media on Criminalization and Criminal Behaviors

Iran

Social media in Iran play a dual role in shaping criminalization processes and influencing criminal behavior. On the one hand, these platforms contribute to crime prevention by increasing public awareness regarding laws and the legal consequences of criminal conduct. Through dissemination of information about offenses and their repercussions, social media facilitate crime reduction and encourage citizen participation in combating criminal activities (3). Media platforms also strengthen social supervision mechanisms; the publication of information concerning violations and social misconduct may deter repetition of criminal acts and reinforce informal social control.

On the other hand, unregulated participation in cyberspace has contributed to the expansion of various forms of criminal activity. Research identifies the growth of cybercrime, defamation, dissemination of false information, and incitement to violence as significant negative consequences associated with social media environments (13, 14). Media exposure may shape behavioral models—particularly among adolescents—through imitation mechanisms, while the amplification of specific behaviors can indirectly influence the process of criminalization itself. Furthermore, the spread of misinformation and rumors through social networks may negatively affect public opinion, intensify psychological tensions, and ultimately contribute to increased criminal conduct (2).

For example, under Article 16 of the Iranian Computer Crimes Law, acts such as defamation and dissemination of falsehoods through computer systems are explicitly criminalized, demonstrating the direct influence of digital media on legal definitions of crime (7). Overall, despite positive effects such as public participation and preventive awareness, social media in Iran have also facilitated the expansion of cyber offenses, misinformation dissemination, and incitement to violent behavior (3, 14).

Afghanistan

Social media in Afghanistan similarly function as a double-edged phenomenon. On the positive side, these platforms may enhance citizens' legal awareness, promote crime-prevention education, and facilitate public participation in security affairs, thereby contributing to crime reduction (4). For instance, dissemination of anti-corruption reports and security-related information through social networks can support authorities in addressing misconduct and strengthening accountability mechanisms.

Conversely, Afghanistan's digital space has also become conducive to the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and encouragement of violence, thereby intensifying social instability. Social media platforms can amplify conspiracy narratives and rumors, generating public disorder, while provocative content may increase motivations

for violent criminal behavior within society (1, 11). Importantly, media operations in Afghanistan have been strongly shaped by political structures: during the Islamic Republic period, media environments operated with comparatively greater openness, whereas under subsequent political transformations, social media have increasingly functioned as instruments of state-driven criminalization and social control.

In general, although social media in Afghanistan contribute to awareness-raising and civic engagement, the dissemination of misleading and hate-oriented information has intensified cultural and security conflicts (1, 4).

Consequently, social media have exerted extensive influence on criminalization processes and criminal behavior patterns in both Iran and Afghanistan. In Iran, the existence of defined cybercrime legislation has enabled institutional responses to digital misuse, yet challenges such as misinformation and online incitement remain significant. In Afghanistan, social media have simultaneously enhanced public awareness and fueled waves of rumor dissemination and extremism amid ongoing security and political transformations. Both countries therefore require effective legal frameworks, supervisory mechanisms, and public education initiatives aimed at responsible digital participation in order to harness benefits while mitigating harmful consequences (12, 15).

Comparative Study of Iranian and Afghan Laws

A comparison of criminal laws and policies governing social media demonstrates that both countries possess regulatory frameworks addressing cyberspace and media activities; however, their approaches and regulatory scope differ considerably. In Afghanistan, the Cyber Crimes Law enacted in 2014 constitutes the first comprehensive legislative framework addressing cyber offenses. This law aims to preserve information security, prevent cyberattacks, and prosecute computer-related crimes, defining cybercrime broadly as any criminal act committed through information and communication technologies in virtual environments (8, 12).

Additionally, Afghan media legislation adopted in subsequent years introduced regulatory oversight over content disseminated through mass media, including messaging platforms and social networks. These regulations emphasize supervision of media content and prevention of morally harmful or security-threatening publications (6).

In Iran, the Computer Crimes Law of 2009 established the primary legal foundation for addressing cyber offenses. The statute criminalizes acts such as unauthorized access to data, illegal interception, computer espionage, defamation, and dissemination of false information through digital systems (7). Subsequent legal developments have sought to expand regulatory coverage over emerging online activities. In addition, Iran's Press Law and media regulations govern a substantial portion of online media activity by defining prohibited content, including insult, defamation, false information dissemination, and material contrary to public morality (18).

Furthermore, provisions within Iran's Islamic Penal Code establish punishments for hacking, unauthorized access, and dissemination of immoral digital content, reflecting an integrated legal framework combining cybercrime legislation, media regulation, and criminal law enforcement mechanisms. Institutional enforcement is supported by specialized bodies such as cyber police and policymaking institutions responsible for cyberspace governance (9, 14).

By contrast, Afghanistan's legal system represents a hybrid structure combining statutory law with Islamic jurisprudential principles. The cybercrime regulatory framework remains less institutionally consolidated, and earlier criminal provisions have often been extended to online conduct. Media laws prohibit publication of immoral or unethical content and employ relatively broad criminalization approaches within digital environments (5, 6). From a criminal policy perspective, Iran adopts a more centralized and proactive regulatory model, whereas Afghanistan's

governance of cyberspace has evolved gradually through comparatively weaker institutional structures and remains subject to ongoing political transformation.

Similarities and Differences in Criminalization within Social Media

Similarities

Despite structural differences, Iran and Afghanistan demonstrate convergence in criminalizing certain social media behaviors, largely due to shared Islamic-cultural values. Both legal systems criminalize defamation, dissemination of false information, and reputational harm conducted through social media platforms. Likewise, production or distribution of obscene content contrary to public morality constitutes a punishable offense in both jurisdictions (6, 7). Incitement to crime—including encouragement of violence or corruption through online networks—is similarly subject to criminal sanctions.

More broadly, behaviors perceived as threatening national security, public morality, or Islamic values are punishable under both legal systems. Acts such as insult toward religious sanctities are criminalized in each country, reflecting shared normative foundations rooted in Islamic legal traditions. Consequently, offenses involving moral corruption, defamation, and reputational harm within cyberspace remain prosecutable in both jurisdictions (15).

Differences

Notwithstanding these similarities, significant differences exist in the criminalization of cyberspace, arising from divergent governmental structures, legal foundations, and legislative approaches. Iran maintains a relatively unified and codified legal system grounded in Islamic–civil law traditions, with the Computer Crimes Law providing explicit definitions of cyber offenses (7). In Afghanistan, however, regulation historically relied on dispersed legal provisions combining civil and Islamic norms, and comprehensive cybercrime legislation has developed more gradually.

Regarding freedom of expression, Iranian constitutional and legal frameworks recognize expression subject to conformity with Islamic principles, thereby limiting the scope of institutional criticism. By contrast, Afghanistan's earlier constitutional arrangements recognized broader expressive freedoms, albeit constrained by national security and religious considerations (17). Punitive severity also differs: Iranian law prescribes comparatively stricter sanctions for certain cyber-related offenses, while Afghan penalties generally emphasize imprisonment and financial penalties rather than severe corporal punishments.

Institutionally, Iran benefits from specialized enforcement bodies—including cyber police units and dedicated prosecutorial branches—within an active judicial system. Afghanistan, however, has faced structural challenges, limited resources, and the gradual development of cyber policing institutions. Overall, although both countries share common criminalization principles regarding harmful online conduct, differences in legal organization, institutional capacity, and interpretations of Islamic law have produced substantial regulatory divergence. Iran exhibits a more structured legal framework, whereas Afghanistan—particularly in recent periods—has increasingly adopted stricter regulatory approaches rooted in religious governance, thereby elevating risks associated with online activity.

Legal and International Approaches

The concepts of human rights and freedom of expression, as reflected in international legal instruments, constitute the normative foundation for protecting freedom of information and communication. International human

rights standards recognize freedom of expression as encompassing the right to hold opinions and to receive and disseminate information across borders. At the same time, international law permits states to impose lawful restrictions where necessary to safeguard national security, public order, morality, or the rights of others, provided that such limitations are legally prescribed and proportionate within a democratic society. These principles affirm that individuals retain the right to access and share information within cyberspace and that unjustified interference in digital communications may constitute a violation of human rights (17).

Simultaneously, states bear responsibility for establishing legal and institutional mechanisms to combat unlawful online content—such as racist propaganda or child exploitation material—while ensuring that enforcement measures remain consistent with human rights protections. Accordingly, contemporary criminal policy must balance digital freedoms with regulatory safeguards, preventing abuse of cyberspace without undermining fundamental civil liberties (14).

International Instruments and Legal Frameworks for Combating Cybercrime

Numerous international organizations have played significant roles in developing global standards for combating cybercrime. Early initiatives toward regulating computer-related offenses emerged through international policy coordination aimed at protecting privacy and addressing emerging technological risks. International cooperation frameworks gradually encouraged states to criminalize cyber offenses and harmonize national legislation, thereby facilitating transnational legal convergence in cyberspace governance (19).

Within the United Nations system, the General Assembly has, since 2019, adopted successive resolutions addressing cybercrime governance. One group of initiatives emphasized drafting a comprehensive international convention on cybercrime, while other proposals highlighted concerns that excessive regulatory authority could be used to justify expanded governmental control over digital spaces and restrict fundamental freedoms. Alternative approaches therefore emphasized strengthening existing international cooperation mechanisms while explicitly reaffirming the necessity of protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms in cybercrime responses (12).

International professional associations and legal institutions have also contributed to the development of coordinated responses to cybercrime by promoting scholarly dialogue, proposing harmonized criminal policy strategies, and encouraging cooperation among national criminal justice systems. These efforts have reinforced the recognition that cybercrime represents a transnational phenomenon requiring collective legal solutions and shared standards (16).

Among the most significant international legal instruments is the Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime (Budapest Convention, 2001). This treaty was designed to harmonize minimum substantive criminal law standards, strengthen investigative procedures, and enhance judicial and police cooperation among states. The Convention identifies acts such as illegal access to data, unlawful interception, intentional interference with systems or data, and large-scale dissemination of child exploitation material as criminal offenses. By establishing mechanisms for efficient information exchange and cross-border cooperation, the Convention has provided an operational framework for international cybercrime enforcement and coordination (11, 12).

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU), as a specialized agency of the United Nations in the field of communications, plays a crucial role in strengthening global cybersecurity capacity. Through the development of technical standards, cybersecurity frameworks, training initiatives for developing countries, and facilitation of

international cooperation, the ITU contributes to enhancing national resilience against cyber threats and promoting safer digital networks, including protection measures for children in online environments (9).

Finally, INTERPOL supports international law enforcement cooperation by providing information-sharing platforms, operational coordination mechanisms, and joint training programs that assist national police authorities in identifying, investigating, and prosecuting cybercriminals. Consequently, international collaboration—implemented through treaties, resolutions, and institutional cooperation mechanisms—combined with adherence to human rights principles, forms the overarching global framework for combating cybercrime while maintaining respect for fundamental freedoms (16, 19).

Proposals for Improving Criminal Policies in Iran and Afghanistan

Alongside international frameworks, states require optimized domestic mechanisms to effectively govern cyberspace. In the case of Iran, the most significant proposed measures include the following:

- Effective implementation of the Computer Crimes Law (2009), which emphasizes the criminalization of activities such as online threats, defamation, and internet fraud. Under this framework, cyber police authorities may block criminal pages and identify and prosecute offenders.
- Strengthening cyber governance over digital platforms through the imposition of legal obligations on foreign platforms, including the requirement to establish representative offices within Iran, promptly remove criminal content, and cooperate with judicial and security authorities.
- Media policy regulation within domestic cyberspace, including filtering or restricting foreign platforms that fail to comply with Iranian regulations while simultaneously supporting national messaging platforms. Regulatory initiatives aimed at organizing foreign messaging services have been designed to limit non-domestic platforms and reinforce locally developed alternatives.
- Cultural and educational prevention strategies through implementation of media literacy and digital literacy programs, incorporation of cybersecurity education within schools and universities, and training specialized human resources. Such initiatives aim to equip citizens with the skills necessary to recognize harmful content and protect themselves in online environments.
- Development of judicial and criminal enforcement capacities, including accelerating cybercrime prosecution by law enforcement and cyber police units and establishing specialized courts and prosecution offices dedicated to computer-related offenses in order to ensure more expert adjudication of cyber cases.

For Afghanistan, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

- Utilization of existing legal frameworks, including cybercrime legislation and general criminal law provisions, as foundational tools for combating online offenses such as threats, dissemination of content contrary to social or religious norms, and online gambling activities.
- Supervisory and regulatory measures, including filtering or blocking social media platforms that distribute content considered inconsistent with national laws and cultural values, alongside efforts—despite practical challenges—to encourage international platforms to comply with domestic regulations.
- Establishment of specialized cyberspace monitoring institutions within security bodies to conduct continuous monitoring of online content and identify channels involved in disseminating criminal material.

- Public education and cultural awareness initiatives through national awareness campaigns implemented via broadcasting institutions and educational systems, focusing on safe internet use, cybercrime risks, and users' rights and responsibilities, as well as improving youth media literacy and critical evaluation of online information.

- Mobilization of religious and social capacities by engaging community leaders and religious authorities to promote digital ethics and discourage the spread of misinformation and harmful online behavior.

Overall, the success of these measures requires the development of a comprehensive national cybersecurity strategy prepared through coordination among judicial institutions, law enforcement agencies, media organizations, cultural authorities, and educational bodies, alongside regional and international cooperation. Aligning domestic legislation with international standards while respecting human rights principles will help maintain balance between combating cybercrime and safeguarding individual freedoms.

Conclusion

The examination of the role of social media in Iran and Afghanistan demonstrates that digital platforms, as one of the most influential communication tools of the contemporary era, play a decisive role in shaping public opinion and directing criminal policymaking. Theoretical and empirical analysis indicates that media environments influence not only citizens' perceptions of crime and security but also the processes of criminalization and implementation of criminal policies through agenda amplification, behavioral representation, and dissemination of both accurate and misleading information.

In both countries, social media have performed a dual function. On one hand, they have served as instruments for public awareness, social oversight, civic participation, and crime prevention. On the other hand, due to insufficient media literacy, weak supervisory structures, and the ease of content dissemination, these platforms have facilitated the spread of rumors, hate speech, cybercrime, and incitement to violence. This duality has compelled criminal policymakers to adopt broader legal responses to regulate digital environments.

Comparative legal analysis reveals that Iran possesses a more coherent legal system and more specialized executive institutions, including cyber police units and specialized cybercrime prosecution offices. Afghanistan, particularly during recent political periods, operates within a transitional legal framework combining civil, customary, and religious legal elements. Although both countries criminalize behaviors such as dissemination of false information, reputational harm, immoral content, and incitement to violence, differences exist regarding the severity of punishments, enforcement mechanisms, and the scope of limitations imposed on freedom of expression.

The findings suggest that the impact of social media on criminal policy depends less on technology itself and more on each country's political, cultural, and legal structures. In Iran, criminal policy has increasingly moved toward centralized management and content regulation, whereas in Afghanistan institutional fragility and political transformations have produced instability and inconsistency in criminal justice responses. Nevertheless, in both contexts, the absence of comprehensive media literacy education and effective monitoring mechanisms has contributed to the escalation of cybercrime and disruptions to societal psychological security.

Based on these findings, an effective criminal policy concerning social media requires integration of three complementary approaches:

1. Modern and internationally aligned legislation addressing cybercrime,
2. Establishment of specialized institutions equipped with adequate supervisory and enforcement capacities, and

3. Long-term investment in media literacy education and public cultural development.

Ultimately, social media should be understood neither solely as threats nor exclusively as opportunities; rather, they constitute dynamic capacities whose outcomes depend on legal governance, cultural conditions, and policy responses. Effective criminal policymaking in this field therefore requires a balanced, rights-based, and flexible approach capable of simultaneously protecting legitimate civil freedoms while addressing the risks associated with digital environments.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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