

# **CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY AND MEDIATIZED POLITICS; A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AND IRANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS**

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## **Abstract**

After information and communication revolution, social and political life has been deeply mediatized. Besides, the diverse and conventional interpretations made for Mediatization so far, this paper has been developed based on a particular interpretation of mediatized politics which describes a situation in which the media's expanding role and presence in the political life of societies has provided the possibility of Special political activism for ordinary people. This research seeks to answer the main question that whether mediatization of politics affects all societies regardless of their specific capacities and context or it is a contextual phenomenon that has different outcomes in different societies. In this regard two cases, "Joe the Plumber" in US presidential election of 2008 and Mirza Agha in Iranian presidential election 2017 are chosen as ordinary citizens that mediatization of politics enabled them to emerge as a political active subject. By choosing cultural sociology as a theoretical framework, and a comparative study between these two cases in three indices included the dynamics of political subjectivity, media typology and the survival of political subjectivity, this paper has shown that mediatization of politics is a contextual phenomenon, in the sense that in developed democratic society, will lead to the maximum dynamics of political subjectivity in all levels of macro-scale, medium-scale, and micro-scale media and long term durability of subjectivity, while in developing society and pseudo-democracies it would be limited to the durations of holding election and just the minimal dynamics of political subjectivity only in micro-scale media is visible.

**Keywords:** mediatization of politics, Cultural Sociology, Joe the plumber, Mirza Agha, Presidential election.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Today, the public life has been deeply mediatized and it which can be seen as a process of tangling formal and informal aspect of public sphere within the visual media, has deeply transformed the political life and its rules of game, this is what has been called the mediatized politics.

But does the mere presence of communications technology and modern media could produce the same effects, regardless of diverse and different characteristics, level of development and power structures in all societies? Some scholars, including Mazzoleni and Schulz argue that mediatization of politics is a phenomenon that includes almost all political systems in democratic countries, although in each of these countries there may be different forms and Trends (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 2010). But this research shows that mediatization of politics, is not a phenomenon belongs solely to democratic political systems, but it's a general phenomenon in all societies, including pseudo-democracies. Since governments control on media has been reduced increasingly due to the spread and variety of communication technologies, mediatization

of politics became more general, however, it may have different outcomes based on the openness and power structures of societies.

The central idea of this paper is that context determines the directions and forms of media influences on the political arena. In a developed and open society, the mediatization of politics means more active and consciously political participation, as well as highlighting the role of ordinary people in decision making; but in a developing and closed society with a top-down power structure, and even in a pseudo-democracy with a superficial two-way power structure, it not necessary leads to more active political participation and the greater influence of people in politics.

To examine such an argument, this article is developed through a comparative study of two cases in Iranian presidential election 2017 and US presidential election 2008. The case of 'Joe the Plumber' in US presidential election of 2008 is an example of effective role by an ordinary people in the highest level of political competition in one of the most developed political system which is possible due to the mediatization of politics. On the other hand, the case of 'Mirza Agha' in the Iranian presidential election of 2017 is also an exemplar of the impact of the mediatization of politics in a developing society. A comparative study between this to cases suggests that a single phenomenon – the mediatization of politics- might have led to different outcomes based on the context which is occurred, although there also would be similar results.

This is an interpretive research that seeks to understand the logic of ideational structures of political actors in the two Iranian and US societies. The data of this research is gathered from documentary data such as texts, images and videos, which is achieved, in particular, through searching of visual and written media sources. This data is analyzed with qualitative content analysis and interpreted by using a flexible approach and the results are presented in a comparative model.

## 2. DEFINITION OF CASES

### 2.1 Joe The plumber

Close to the end of 2008 US presidential election and during a campaign in Ohio, Democratic nominee Senator Barack Obama had confronted Samuel Joseph Wurzelbacher who was Just a simple plumber. Wurzelbacher who, better known as "Joe the Plumber" told Obama that he was interested in buying his copartner's share but was concerned that Obama's tax plan for business owners and residents would cut into his future profits. The two men had a brief conversation, while the cameras were capturing everything (YouTube(2008){1}). That was just an ordinary encounter, and seemed much simpler than other election events that was similar to the pre-set plays.



**Image 1** : Barack Obama's 2008 October 12 conversation about tax policy with Samuel J.Wurzelbacher three days before last electoral debate with sen. John McCain. (Guardian 2008 , 1 )



**Image 2** McCain and his wife, along with Joe the Plumber , on October 30, 2008 , Washington Park in Sandinsky, Ohio

Three days later, during the last election debate, the Obama's rival, John McCain citing Joe the plumber in the first 5 minutes of his speech and mentioned him 22 times during that night (YouTube(2008){2}). Joe the plumber became the focal theme of Obama's and McCain's election controversy about the economic issues of low-middle classes, and the impact of tax plans on their livelihoods, and he also had a prominent symbolic presence in the verbal expressions of the two rivals.

### 2.2 Mirza Agha

Mirza Agha Pird Mousa is a costermonger of Ardabil Province, whose picture among the crowd of supporters

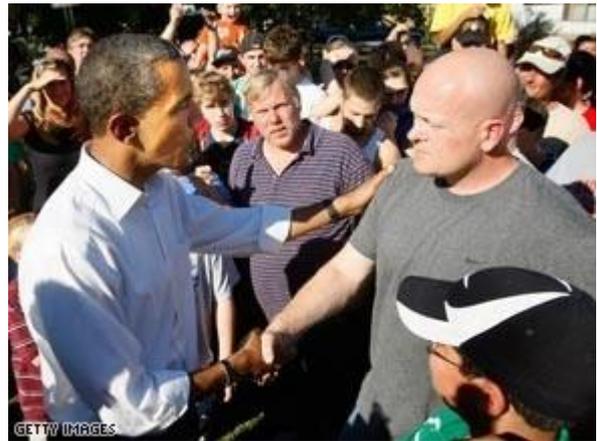
of Hassan Rohani during his propaganda tour in the 12th presidential election in Iran, while his eyes were tearful and had a Election Poster of Rohani in his hand, was widely reflected in media and became one of the most famous media photos of that year. In the short time before the election, Mirza agha turned into a symbol of the lower class support of Rohani and after the election Hasan Rohani made an appointment with him and thanked him.

### 3. POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY

In the first visit of Joe the Plumber and Obama the management of the scene was done by the Obama's publicity management team. Obama was striving to make an image of a politician raised from the ordinary people who is familiar with their concerns for himself, and by revival of the "American Dream" slogan talked about the past of his family and his social class (CNN, 2007) in order to attract the support of characters such as Oprah Winfrey, who represent the public culture of America; and on the contrary, by claiming that McCain is in the pocket of the oil companies, to portray him as a mercenary of the major oil companies, or in other words, to represent him as a member of the highest bourgeoisie in capitalism (Memmott, 2008, ABCnews {2 }). when the image of Obama's unannounced visit to Joe the Plumber -despite the critical attitude toward him- circulates in the media, he is being introduced as a candidate from the public who is out-of-print and decoupage of the electoral campaign is really facing ordinary people and talks with them warmly. His response to Joe the Plumber could also be indicative of this perception; when Joe expresses concern over Obama's tax policy for his future profession, he replies: "I think when you spread the wealth around, it's good for everybody." The correctness of this interpretation is confirmed on the accusation of being socialist on the basis of this statement, which the Republicans attributed to Obama. In the last debate with Obama, McCain claimed that Obama is looking for a mass distribution of wealth by raising taxes –which is considered a socialist approach- and said: " We're going to take Joe's money, give it to Sen. Obama, and let him spread the wealth around. I want Joe the plumber to spread the wealth around."(CNN, 2008). Obama's hand shaking image with Joe the Plumber in the media was indicative of Obama's intimacy and friendliness:



**Image 3** Mirzaagha Pird Mousa at the Shahid Asemani Ardebil Stadium Wednesday, May 27, 2012 (Photographer: Farid Mousavi) (IRNA, 1396)



**Image 4:** Obama's sincere meeting with Joe the Plumber (CNN, 2008)

But, the symbols and images will not remain under control of their creators. Three days later, during the last presidential election debate, John McCain kicked off the debate with Joe the Plumber in the first five minutes, and pointing him 22 times separately during that night (YouTube (2008) {2}).

"Joe the Plumber" became the focal theme at McCain's latest pressure lever in the presidential electoral campaign, as a symbol of why Obama's presidency might be bad for the United States. In addition, McCain and his wife referred to Joe the Plumber in almost any election campaign. Wurzelbacher was seen at McCain's two promotional events in Ohio, and McCain announced to audience in one of them that "You are all Joe the Plumber". A series of electoral propaganda in criticizing Obama's economic plans with a variety of "typical Americans", which were announcing toward the camera that "I am Joe the Plumber." followed this theme (Les Back et al., 2012: 205). McCain said at the first street campaign rally: "He's a great guy, proud of his grandfather who served in the US Marines Corps. We're going to fight for Joe, my friends, we are going to fight for him. The question Joe asked about our economy is important, because Senator Obama's plan would raise taxes on small businesses that employ 16 million Americans. Senator Obama's plan will kill those jobs at just the time when we need to be creating more jobs. My plan will create jobs, and that's what

America needs "(Agence France-Presse, 2008).

In other words, McCain and his team could use Joe the Plumber to besmirch Obama's image as a candidate from ordinary people. McCain and his running mate Sarah Palin put their focus on the economic issues of the lower classes during the final two weeks of the presidential campaign rally, and introduced themselves as advocates for the economic rights of ordinary Americans by frequently referring to Joe the Plumber. The presence of Joe the Plumber, who was introduced as the ordinary citizens' representative, beside McCain and giving speech in republican's publicity stations caused him to be confiscated on the Republican front line, and the republican's widespread power of propaganda was able to fix it; Because as it has already said, in mediatized politics, representing the reality is more important than the reality itself. Wurzelbacher and McCain's team could create conditions that introduce Obama such that he does not really understand the concerns and values of blue-collar workers in the United States by semantic manipulation or meanings; for example, by referring to Obama's golfing pictures or by putting emphasis on the phrase "they cling to guns and religion" instead of a rational and pragmatic encounter with problems that Obama had stated about industrial workers in small industrial towns in Ohio and Pennsylvania in one of his lectures (Guardian, 2008, {1}).

But the meaning of Joe the Plumber was not controlled only by the McCain's team. News media across the country went into Wurzelbacher's background, and reported among other things that he was a tax debtor and his plumbing license has been canceled. More analytical news reports determined that Wazelbacher would not be subject to more tax under Obama's plan, and in fact he would probably be eligible for tax cuts. Joe Biden in the NBC Today Show said that "I don't have any Joe the plumbers in my neighborhood that make \$250,000 a year. The Joe the plumbers in my neighborhood, the Joe the cops in my neighborhood, the Joe the grocery store owners in my neighborhood, they make, like 98 percent of the small businesses, less than \$250,000 a year. I am not worried that Wurzelbacher would not get a tax cut under Obama's plan." (CNN, 2008). In response to the Republican propaganda under the heading "We are all Joe the Plumbers.", McCain's references to "Joe the Plumber" in political comedies, including "Saturday Night Live", "The Colbert Report", and "The Daily Show with John Stewart" was lampooned. Wazelbacher later proved that he has been personally beyond the control of McCain's presidential campaign and he stated that McCain had not been his choice for presidency, and he considered McCain as "the lesser of two evils" (Les Back et al., 207: 2012).

Therefore, the image of Joe the Plumber as a symbol had different meanings during an electoral campaign, which in creating those meanings some elements such as the cultural context of the society, the public media capacities, the opportunism and intelligence of the publicity management teams of the candidates, and of course, Joe the Plumber's cultural luck and his desire to act were involved. Wazelbacher regularly attended conservative political gatherings all over the country, and standing up against taxes and against trade unions, and in favor of conservative family values. At the same time, the groups who were against these policies were engaging in mobilizing anti Wazelbacher scenarios and frequently found plumbers as the "real plumbers" and make them to speak against Joe Wazelbacher in order to mock him and the groups who invited him to attend their gatherings, and to discredit and mock them.



**Image 5:** McCain fans who are dressed like Joe the Plumber (SFGATE, 2008)



**Image 6:** Examples of burlesque images of Joe the Plumbers made by McCain Opponents (freakingnews, 2008)

These ups and downs were much less and weaker about Mirza Agha. In the 12<sup>th</sup> presidential election race, Hassan Rouhani's rivals, especially Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, tried to portray the image that Hassan Rouhani is not only the ordinary people and the majority of society's representative, but also represents the interests of a corrupt, rentier, and interest-seeking minority. Ghalibaf repeatedly used the term 4% for Rouhani in the televised debates and other public space and characterized himself as a representative of the other 96% of ordinary people who have been dominated and exploited that 4% (Rokna, 1396). He later on tried to feature himself as Ahmadinejad –who portrayed himself as a modest man which is a desirable norm between the mass- by presence among workers and the middle and lower classes of the society under the slogan "people's government", in order to depict himself as the public goodness and blessing and introduce Rouhani and his government as the representative of the public evil.



**Image 7:** One of Ghalibaf's posters in 2017 election. This poster featured three great Qalibaf slogans: free education for the poor to Ph.D., Increasing the level of rural insurance to the level of urban insurance, and reducing people's fees for healthcare costs to 50%



**Image 8:** One of Ghalibaf's posters in the 2017 election in the background of a photo ads (ISNA, 1396, {2}). In this poster, Hassan Rouhani is going and Qalibaf is looking at his watch. The text is: do not forget our promise: the 4% must go



**Image 9:** publicities in the official newspaper of the municipality of Tehran "Hamshahri" in favor of the Mayor's function (24onlinenews). The text is: A fundamental change in favor of 96% of the population



**Image 10:** Ghalibaf's photo ads and presence in a crowded subway

Although this symbolism and image management by Ghalibaf and his publicity team has been hit and weakened, and for reasons that are not discussed in this text, it was initially weak in articulation, the publication of Mirza Agha's photo and the symbolism and animating it by the anticonservatives was very successful in destruction of the 96% representative's image. The symbolism and meanings were largely based on elements that were observed in the interviews that were published after the publication of that photo with Mirza Agha, and also on the footnotes and feedbacks of the photo in social networks -or so-called "comments and posts". Even like the Republican's publicity about Joe the Plumber where "I am Joe the Plumber" became a slogan of McCain's fans, a hashtag entitled "#I am also Mirza Agha" was made active by

Rouhani's fans in the social networks.

But what factors have made Mirza Agha's image into an influential element in this media competition? The most obvious important element was the emphasis on the keyword "mayor" in the rumors that emerged after appearance of Mirza Agha's subject in the interviews. Ghalibaf was the mayor of Tehran and despite many criticisms of his performance in Tehran's urban management, his publicity team managed to rely on some titles and statistics-for example, the eighth highest-ranking mayor of the world in 2008- and use this record to consolidate his pragmatic personality and to introduce Ghalibaf as a successful manager (Fig. 10). But mutually the opponents of Ghalibaf were able to cleverly create a meaningful subscription between two different examples of "Ghalibaf" and "Mirza Agha" in order to not only put negative meanings on his performance in Tehran's municipality, but also shake up his symbolic position as the supporter and representative of the lower classes and poor people of the society. It was only by giving sense to this simple proposition that Mirza Agha, as a symbol of the suffered and oppressed people of Iran's society, is severely damaged by the municipality's function, but is lovingly and gratefully supporter of Hassan Rouhani and his government's policies. Here, the symbolic role of the keyword "mayor" is such emphasized that its generalization weakens its spatial implications and the audience subconsciously finds the responsibility of Ardabil's municipality's dysfunctionality referable to the municipality of Tehran, and as a result, Mirza Agha becomes a symbol of why Ghalibaf is a bad mayor. Mirza Agha, in a post-election interview, whose content was the main overview of the subjects which were spread in form of some clips before the election, announced about the municipality: "Since I was young I worked with a pickup truck in Ardabil's Mother square. I have been selling fruit on my pickup truck's cargo by a few years ago, until once the **municipality officials** came to my stuff and broke everything up. Obviously, that was their frequent work. I no longer had money to go to the main wet market (farmers market) and buy fruit. If I bought fruit, **they** would not allow me to sell them on the sidewalk. I was bankrupt. ... my life was again on the routine until a few months ago, **they** took one of my carts again, and smashed it and threw it behind the slaughterhouse." (Aftab, 1396).

Mirza Agha's picture and his interviews also imply a deep emotional relationship between him and Hassan Rouhani. In the Image 3, he is being depicted as a lover that his eyes filled with tears of joy on the beloved's visit, and is taking his hat in his hand as if it is a sign of respect. His words and expressions in the interview also features such emotional relationships:

"I **love Mr. Rouhani** very much, as well as **Mr. Hashemi**, God bless him. Some years ago, in a day when **Mr. Khatami** had come to the Ardabil Stadium, I would have liked to go and visit him, but I was late and he had gone. Because of this, when I heard Mr. Rouhani had come for a lecture to the stadium, I ran to meet him. That morning, I took my cart with 200 kilo grams of potatoes and onions to the Mother square for sale. But as soon as I heard that Mr. Rouhani is coming to the Takhti stadium, I left all my stuff in the street and ran to the club ... a few days before Mr. Rouhani come to Ardabil, I had taken his photos and put them on the cart beside the potatoes and onions that I was selling to the people. I was showing his photo to the people and telling them to vote for him. I made everyone who was buying potatoes and onions from me to take an oath of voting for Rouhani."(Aftab, 1396).

Another point that was considered in Mirza Agha as a symbol was the continuum of the political values of the reformists in the 12<sup>th</sup> presidential election. Mirza Agha states that he like not only Hassan Rouhani, but also Hashemi Rafsanjani and Khatami and it means that a set of political values represented by these characters has a meaningful or semantic bond with a wide range of the lower class strata of society that represented by Mirza Agha. This is despite the fact that the reformists have always been introduced as the middle and upper class representatives, who have been largely advocates of freedom in the duality of freedom and justice.

Mirza Agha is also referred to the values in the interviews that are considered essential elements and a requirement of accreditation in the Islamic Republic. Therefore, he cannot be simply labeled as "Other" by means of customization tricks; he states in an interview that he has been many times in the war and is a veteran. Furthermore, he stated about the cause of his tearful eyes in the photo that:"When the President firmly stated that I pulled the blocked money out of the mouth of the US, it unconsciously brought tears to my eyes." (Aparat, 1396).Hence, Mirza Agha, with regard to being an anti-American and veteran, has credible credentials which protect him from exclusion.

He also has a level of cultural luck similar to Joe the Plumber. In the Joe the Plumber's case, the exposure of an ordinary citizen to a presidential candidate was found appealing to the media due to the state of breaking the usual imaginations of a scheduled content for election campaigns and depicting them from a decoupage TV show as a realistic documentary. This charm attracted the attention of media to Joe the Plumber, and later on going round the media was formed around this issue in either sides of the campaign, and of course, the personality of Joe the Plumber caused the continuation of this process. In Mirza Agha's case, also, the specific features of the photo, the specific elements of the time of its publication, and of course, the media

intelligence of Rouhani's fans, created such a phenomenon.

The framing of the photo is such that Mirza Agha is in the center of it and in the background of the mass of the crowd. This image somehow suggests Mirza Agha as "one of the thousands" or a representative of the majority, and creates the frame and magnification of this definition in the unconscious mind of the audience that Mirza Agha is not merely one and alone, instead there are thousands and maybe millions of people similar to him who vote for Rouhani. On the other hand, Mirza Agha is in the center of the image as if he was single and alone in a crowd of people; Also, his face indicates a different state than the sense of the population. His relationship is not with the crowd, but with someone who is aligned with his (Hassan Rouhani) vision. He is looking at him romantically and of course desperately, and is putting off his hat probably as a sign of respect and is holding it in his hand. Mirza Agha, at the center of this photo, transfers a blend of emotions such as affection, love, respect, helplessness, and hope behind of despair. There is a poster of Hassan Rouhani in his opposite hand and this strongly highlights the semantic bond between Mirza Agha and Hassan Rouhani. Also, Mirza Agha's photo is different from the ones that are commonly used in media coverage of similar events. In the media culture of Iran, such events usually display mass of the crowd in a long shot frame, where the individuality has been lost in them; the crowd of people is important, not the persons that formed the crowd. In these images, usually the elites and celebrities have the chance and opportunity to be focused, and the crowd is staring at them, gathering around them, or standing behind them. But in Mirza Agha's photo, this stereotype has been broken and an ordinary citizen has been considered in the background of the crowd. This deconstructing, as applied to Joe the Plumber's case, was also depicted in Mirza Agha's case as one of the cultural fortune factors (Fig. 3).

But the time of publishing the photo has also played a key role. While fundamentalist candidates have tried to adhere Hassan Rouhani to the economically and politically corrupt higher classes, and introduce him as the representative of a rentier minority, and mutually depict themselves as the representative of 96% of the middle and lower classes of society; the image of Mirza Agha, as a symbol of the lowest economic classes and the most deprived strata of society in support of Hassan Rouhani, completely reverse the meaning of conservative's symbols. Reproduction of the image and presentation of interpretations by pro-Hassan Rouhani's media and attempting to address the silent object of Mirza Agha through sporadic video interviews published on social networks is another factor in the cultural luck of Mirza Agha. In other words, the image of Mirza Agha found its own specific meaning in the background of mediatized politics symbolism during the 12<sup>th</sup> presidential election campaign, and may not receive an insignificant attention in different circumstances. Only when Rouhani is depicted as a representative of the higher and rentier classes, such a picture of a costermonger can represent the above meanings and reverse the symbols of Rouhani's rivals.

But in the case of Mirza Agha, contrary to Joe the Plumber, there is not any reciprocation in meaning makings or going around media. In the Joe the Plumber's case the media actions and reactions in changing the meaning of the phenomenon of Joe is repeatedly evident, and the Democrats and Republicans frequently attempt to exploit the meaning of Joe in their favor or distort the image that the opposing party was of him. In Mirza Agha's case, the conservatives' media did not handle the simplest response, and the meaning of this phenomenon remained in the full monopoly of the reformists. One of the most important reasons for this situation was the short time left until the deadline of the electoral campaign, which could explain this inactivity. The image of Mirza Agha was taken and spread on the last day of publicity for the presidential election campaigning on Rouhani's visit to Ardabil on May 17, 2017, and it was similar to a goal scored in the 90<sup>th</sup> minute of a soccer play which took the possibility of compensation from the opponent. In addition, the failure in conservative's publicity in new media in similar cases, especially in the case of Amir Tataloo, has greatly increased the caution and conservatism of their team and pushed them into inactivity. It might have also reinforced their will to inactivity and surrender possibly due to their unfamiliarity with the operational environment of such events and the lack of similar experience between the Conservatives' publicity promotional teams.

#### **4. MEDIA TYPOLOGY**

Another distinguishing feature of Joe the Plumber's case with Mirza Agha's case can be searched in a different level of media coverage around this subject. According to the classification that Tehranian provides of media in cultural interactions, three levels of media can be distinguished. First, macro media run by global macro capitals and large transnational corporations, and generally develop and promote the culture and lifestyle of liberal capitalism, such as Hollywood or satellite TV channels. The medium media are put in the second level that can be controlled and monitored by states for various cultural purposes, including the creation and preservation of national identity and national cohesion, depending on how political power structure and the degree of openness of the cultural environment; such as the press, books, National Radio and Television, news agencies, and other instances. The micro media are at the third level that can be used

to resist cultural impositions of national and global levels as well as the creation and cohesion of subcultures; such as email, fax, cassette tape, telephone, cellphone, and of course social networks (Tehrani, 1997).

The presence of all three levels of media in Joe the Plumber's case is evident in representing the meanings of that circumstance. The macro media such as Fox News and CNN along with the medium media such as local TVs, had a major role in spreading and highlighting this circumstance. The Public Television was the main bed of this media phenomenon, because the nature of the event required such an occasion, and it was an event from a confrontation, dialogue, and association that was recorded by cameras. The case of Joe the Plumber was first displayed on TVs and was highlighted at the highest level in the latest debate between Obama and McCain, which had a large television broadcast, and since then, the most reactions to it were organized in the form of report, argumentation, debate, analysis, and even the television comedy shows on TV. Although the issue was also pursued in the micro media at the level of redistribution in lower layers or the reactions at individual levels. For example, Joe the Plumber interviewed shortly after the last TV debate between Obama and McCain on CBS evening News on October 15, 2008 (CBS NEWS, 2008, {1}). He held a news conference at his home in the morning of October 16, (Mehta & Reston, 2008, Los Angeles Times). He later on spoke to Good Morning America of ABC News channel (ABC NEWS, 2008, {1}), and then at the same day, he appeared on the "Your World with Neil Cavuto" in Fox News (Rohter, 2008, New York Times {2}). These few examples of the presence on the largest television channels of the United States only in two days of the electoral campaign, prove the significant role of the television in highlighting and featuring of Joe the Plumber's instance.

But on the contrary, in the case of Mirza Agha, there is not a trace of macro and medium media. The lack of private television channels in Iran and the special policies of National Iranian Radio and Television in reflecting the election news have made Mirza Agha's case being disregarded at this level of media. The National Iranian Radio and Television tried, at least ostensibly, to consider media ethics in the reflection of the election news equally to the candidates' aural and visual opportunities; therefore, it was limited in covering the promotional campaign rallies of the candidates in various cities by providing images in the long Shot frame of the crowd and close-ups of the candidates while lecturing. The official media in the Islamic Republic of Iran are an accurate example of the medium media in the typology of Tehranian that the political regime uses all its power to direct, control, and monitor them. The National Radio and Television is structured and its policy making is such that any independent voice cannot find a possibility of appearing. In such an inflexible space, the management and directing the promotional activities in the presidential election becomes always a challenging issue. The main challenge is always about this paradox that how can represent the ostensible existence of an open political environment, which is a requirement of an electoral space in a pseudo-democracy, but to keep the content of the debate limited to a controlled framework; for example, how to hold the election debate between candidates also prevent the candidates from crossing the red lines in the heat of a debate. The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting's experience in conducting peer to peer debates in the 10th presidential election campaign in 2009, which resulted in widespread chaos and protests, led to this state that they avoided any peer to peer debate and confrontation between the candidates in the 11th and 12th presidential elections in 2013 and 2017, and be satisfied by TV programs and group debates with full dominance of the host.

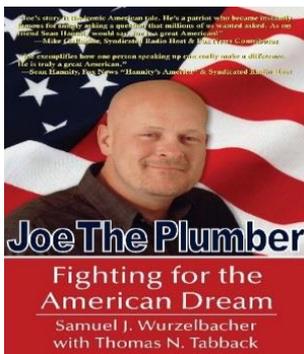
Therefore, the case of Mirza Agha was raised on social networks, and was highlighted by social activists and Celebrities through redistributing, and penetrated into the political arena. The Mirza Agha's phenomenon remained in the same third-level media space before the election, and it was after the election that Mirza Agha was presented in public at the level of news agencies and official newspapers after an interview or the publication of his meeting with the governor and the President. He never found a place in the National Iranian Radio and Television.

## **5. DURABILITY OF SUBJECT**

Joe the Plumber appeared as an actor subject not only during the 2008 Presidential election campaign, but also as a political activist after the election, and he continued to remain active in political and social activities and remained an actor subject by now. He then signed two contracts for advertising in 2008 (Taub, 2008, The New York Times {3}). Then, he went on to publish his book along with another author, "Joe the Plumber: A Fighting for the American Dream" and promoted his views about American values (Itzkoff, 2008, The New York Times {1}). In 2009, he was recruited as a war correspondent and made an expedite to Israel during the Gaza war (Associated Press, 2009).

Joe the Plumber continued his political career and criticized McCain in his book as well as several interviews. He considered McCain as the lesser of two evils, claiming McCain's use of him has really screwed up his life. Even once in 2009, it was said that he has split from the Republican Party (Grunwald, 2009, Time magazine). He ran for the United States House of Representatives in the 2012 Congressional election for

achievement of Ohio's 9<sup>th</sup> Congressional seat (fec .gov, 2012) and also he launched a professional news site called JoeForAmerica.com. Joe the Plumber has expressed blunt and extreme positions about illegal immigration policies and in opposition to the gun control. He is among those who have spoken about the installation of barbed wire on the Mexican border to prevent the entrance of illegal immigrants, and also stated that the disarmament of citizens will make them unable to defend themselves, and the Holocaust of the Jews during the Second World War and also the Armenian Genocide by the Ottoman Empire were the direct result of the implementation of gun control and public disarmament policies (CBS News, 2012, {2}). This list has only been a part of the political and social presence of Joe the Plumber since 2008; but this abstract list also proves that Joe the Plumber, who was an ordinary citizen before the accidental encounter with Obama, has thereafter to this day been as a continuum actor subject.



**Image 11:** the book cover of “Joe Plumber: Fighting for the American Dream”



**Image 12:** Joe the Plumber's interview with Fox News about 2016 Presidential election competition between Trump and Sanders (Crooks&liars, 2016)

But in Mirza Agha's case, after a widespread reflection on social networks, he quickly turned into a silent object as an absolute confiscation process, and then ended. In the first step after the announcement of the election results, the official media reported that his appointment with the governor of Ardabil and a group of authorities was set in order to being ready to meet the President with coordination of provincial incumbents (Young Journalists Club, 2017). Later on, he went on to meet with the President in a conference on celebrating Hassan Rouhani's campaign headquarters, which was held on May 24, 2017 in the Ministry of Interior's hall, and like a lover who was graciously loved, nestled in the embrace of Hassan Rouhani (ISNA, 2017 {1}). Then, according to the media reports, the promises were given to him for the employment of his son and also, Iran Khodro Company (automobile manufacturing) invites Mirza Agha to that company for his moral and social altruistic approach and in line with his social responsibilities and has devoted a pickup truck to him (Asre Iranian, 2017) and that was the end point of Mirza Agha.



**Image 13:** Gratitude of Hassan Rouhani from Mirza Agha (ISNA, 2017 (1))



**Image 14:** Donation of a pickup truck to Mirza Agha by Iran Khodro (Asre Iranian, 2017)

## 6. CONCLUSION

Comparing the two cases of Joe the Plumber and Mirza Agha determines how a unique phenomenon - mediatized politics- in various fields or contexts can have different outcomes and effects. In other words, the different cultural context, the different structure of political power and the different structure and type of

media in two different countries, represent different content from a single phenomenon, and make different outcomes. In a rational political culture, which is a character of a developed society, what the mediatized politics presents to the market is of content that there is enough demand for it. Joe the Plumber is a symbolic commodity whose features in the American political market have some demandants who are consistently calculating the cost-benefit in terms of market logic for their attention. Joe the Plumber's case not only had the qualities for cultural luck, but also had a trace of instrumental rationality consistent with the general logic and foundations of the American political culture. His concern and critique was over the cost-benefit calculation on Obama's tax plan and what real impact would Obama's presidency have on the quality of his life and other Americans in his class; and this is a logic that is widespread in the American society. Since the majority of lower class Americans, based on this logic, could have similar concerns and feel identification with him, then the symbolic phenomenon of Joe had the required acceptance capacity and was demanded in that market. The reciprocity of the definition of Joe on both sides of the competition was, also, based on such a rationale. McCain / Palin, in their late concluding speeches, focused on the idea that Obama's tax plan would kill small businesses and make life in the lower classes worse, referring to Joe. On the other hand, Obama / Biden and the Democrats campaign, in addition to trying to undermine the symbolic credentials and position of Joe, focused on the idea that their tax plan would not only worsen the living conditions of these classes, but also increases the standard of living of Americans and the lower classes find will gain more benefit from it. Joe the Plumber, himself, emphasized the logic of instrumental rationality when introduced McCain as the inevitable election that was "the lesser of two evils", and proved that he gives his political representation to the candidate merely on the basis of calculation of benefits.

In contrast, in a subject political culture which is a character of a transitional society, the guide of political behavior of the society is not cost-benefit rationality, but emotional bonds with political leadership. Mirza Agha talks about his passion for Hassan Rouhani and the other reformist figures, and how in poverty and shortage, when he heard Rouhani came to his city to deliver a speech, left his cart with the onions which was his all property on the sidewalk of the street and ran to the stadium; a face full of his feelings in the photo also demonstrates such a relationship. In his speech, there are no propositions of the cost-benefit calculations; his real life is in pain and suffer and there is no evidence to suggest that Rouhani's government policies in the former state have improved his life situation or it will improve in the next administration. In other words, his relationship with Rouhani is emotional, not giving the political representation based on rationality. He stipulates that how the rhetorical statements against America in his speech emotionally stimulated him and his eyes filled with tears.

The fortune to Mirza Agha's instance is also based on the attribute of Iranians political culture, and he offers something that Iranian society demands. Although pro-Rouhani's media activists correctly used Mirza Agha's image to destroy the symbolic face of the Conservative candidates as the supporters of lower classes, this use was based on the proper identification of the characteristics of a society in which emotional stimulation acts much better than rational reasoning. The praise of plainness, pity, gratitude, and most importantly, passion were important elements that the symbolic image of Mirza Agha had and would have made it attractive for the Iranian audience. Therefore, it can be concluded that the cultural context is effective in functions of mediatization of politics, since if in these two cases, the subjects were replaced with each other, due to the lack of conformity with the cultural context, neither Joe the Plumber in Iran nor Mirza Agha in the United States were not seen and heard.

The difference in levels of development is related to difference in media structures. In developed and democratic societies the medium media are driven, organized, and controlled by civil societies and not by the governments, and the governments do not go beyond guaranteeing their contractual and legal frameworks. Therefore, in Joe the Plumber's case, it is observed that the macro and medium media have an essential role in representing the phenomenon, and Joe quickly becomes a TV personage right after being introduced, and given the level of penetration and accessibility of TV in the society of America finds a remarkable generalization. On the contrary, in pseudo-democracies, the medium media are entirely under the control and supervision of the regimes, and only the micro media are in the civil societies' hands despite the filtering and punishment of the regimes, thanks to the expansion of communication technologies. Therefore, in Mirza Agha's case, it can be observed that the medium media have no influence on the formation and rise of the phenomenon, although they take action in the process of confiscating and halting it. Mirza Agha's phenomenon formed in the context of micro media, therefore, despite the fact that the access level of Iranians to the modern communication technologies is relatively high compared to other similar societies, Mirza Agha has never been more successful and general such as Joe the Plumber, who is formed in the macro and medium media.

Ultimately, the power structures have a significant effect on the immanence of subjects in a mediatized policy. The two-way power structure in the US political system, reflected in the public sphere of the

community, has provided such conditions for Joe the Plumber that his subjectivity has continued since 2008. Joe who is an ordinary citizenship and his background and experiences are limited to serving in the US Air Force and plumbing, finds this capacity and possibility to freely manage his unstable relationships with his desired political party and along with a variety of political and social activities, runs for the US House of Representatives as a candidate. Conversely, in pseudo-democracies which are based on a simulative two-way structure, ordinary people have very limited capacities in political action and only in the stage of election campaigns they might become temporary political subjects.

Mirza Agha directly involved in a confiscation process immediately after the Presidential election and his file was being closed quickly with the election record. The ceremony to honor Rouhani's campaign staff is a kind of closing ceremony of political activism in the public sphere and Mirza Agha, which symbolizes the demands of the lower classes, is in the embrace of his beloved Hassan Rouhani at the final scene of a romantic drama, and driving a pickup truck toward his city and it ends the story.

Perhaps, near the next Presidential election, Mirza Agha's case will be restored and symbolized by the parties again, but in the current situation it can be assured that Mirza Agha's subject is dead. But the image of Mirza Agha after this time and in the background of today's Iranian society does not mean the same as it did two days before the 12th Presidential election. Now, when you look at it, you see a picture of desperation, inability, helplessness, and endless suffering of people who are hopeful to their subjectivity on the eve of the election as a limited, and ostensible subjects, and they are forgotten again and again and still continue.

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