

**Different Opinions on the Use of Social Media in the Iran Election Protests of 2009**

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## **Introduction**

Iran, 1997: Politicians discover the internet as a platform from which they can campaign.

Iran, 2003: Students discover rudimentary social tools online to organize and express their opinions, even if they be completely against the regime. (Rahimi, 2003)

Iran, 2009: Iran is ripe for a revolution where social media would be a major proponent. Iran has a population of about 70,000,000 people, where just over half of those people are below 25 years old. (Chiesa, Sukarya, Temes & Kageyama, 2008) Their generation has grown up with technology and the internet; they're much more agile with it than ever before. Mozorov said it best: "The government's tight control of the Internet has spawned a generation adept at circumventing cyber roadblocks, making the country ripe for a technology-driven protest movement." (Mozorov, 2009).

June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009. Merely 6 days before the fated presidential election in Iran, a government-sponsored poll was issued that showed the incumbent Ahmadinejad fighting a losing battle. 16 to 18 million Iranians stated that they were going to vote for Mir Hossein Mousavi, compared to the 6 to 8 million who sided with Ahmadinejad. The election seemed that it was going to be a landslide victory for Mir Hossein Mousavi. (Bahari, 2009)

On election day, however, Ahmadinejad came out on top with over 60% of the votes. The Iranian population cried foul, took to the streets, and began what would be a massive protest, and one that fully relied on the new technology.

Social media such as Youtube, Twitter, and Blogging were employed to get the word out to both a local and international audience. (Carafano, 2009) Cyber-warfare and Internet loopholes like proxy servers were employed to ensure that the right information got into the right hands at the right time as well. To the West, it seemed like the perfect storm for a digital revolution. Some believe that this revolution was completely pushed forward by the tech-savvy youth, but others believe that social media played a minimal role. This paper will examine both sides of this argument, beginning with the highly popularized social network, Twitter.

## **Introduction to Twitter**

Twitter is a social network founded in 2006 around the concept of short updates, or “Tweets”. Twitter has become notorious for its 140-character limit on its Tweets, a limit originally imposed to facilitate updates through text messages by mobile devices. (Twitter, 2009) This is important because of the manner they are intended to be consumed. While some blogs are designed to be read over a period of time, Tweets can be read at any time, in any place, within a matter of seconds. These short updates are very important for spreading short messages across the internet very quickly. These small messages may link to larger blog posts or websites, but the initial message is what needs to get around, and Twitter is excellent at this.

Twitter's conversations are organized into two categories: “@ replies”, “trending topics”, and “retweets”. @ replies allow a user to respond to a previous user, or a specific tweet. “Trending Topics” are key words or phrases that have appeared very often in tweets globally. This gives any visitor to the site a general idea of what kinds of topics are being discussed on a massive scale through Twitter. Retweets are the standard for repeating information through the social network. Retweets are a direct copy of the original update, but are preceded with “RT @[original Twitter Username]”.

## **Why Twitter?**

Some may wonder why Twitter was the medium of choice for the majority of discussion involving the Iran Election Protests. Twitter was chosen for many reasons, such as the level of simplicity, the portability of the platform, the public forum, and the agility of the network in the face of censorship.

Twitter is as simple as a social network can get. There is one question to ask: What are you doing? This question has a 140-character answer that can relay almost any message about the current state. In this way, protesters could shout out that they were en route to a protest at a specific location,

and the message would spread, causing more people to join in. The ability to tweet from anywhere is also a boon to organization. Any cell phone with text messaging capabilities can be set up as a Twitter client, enabling access to the social network from anywhere with a cellular signal.

Another benefit of Twitter is that it is 100% a public forum. On most accounts, anything one could say is instantly viewable from anyone in the world, without any of the restrictions one would find on a website like Facebook. This is beneficial, because through Trending Topics or simple Twitter searches, protestors can reach out and broadcast their message across the world.

Finally, Twitter is a very versatile website. This is possibly one of the most important aspects of the social network. In the face of governmental censorship, it was necessary to avoid internet blockades through the use of Twitter apps (“Applications”) and proxy servers.

There are countless applications through which one may interact with the social network. If one uses one of these applications to update their Twitter status, their message will not be routed directly to the Twitter service, rather it will pass through the application's servers, and then those servers pass the information along to the Twitter service. This is important because if the government saw fit to block access to Twitter.com, Twitter apps would be able to get around these restrictions. Twitter applications are available for many mobile platforms in addition to any home computer.

Proxy servers are another way that the population can connect to government-blocked websites and services. They are a computer set up in a remote location that will act in the same way that Twitter applications do. A user in the oppressed area would connect to a proxy, and ask that computer to fetch all the websites for them. In this way, the Iranians would be able to access the unfiltered web. Many Twitter applications like ÜberTwitter also have built-in proxy support, making them doubly effective at avoiding the overall.

Carafano highlights the biggest advantage to using Twitter: Street Journalism. Street journalism takes two forms: one where the citizen collects the content and edits and publishes it themselves, and another form where the citizen collects the content and passes it on to professional news outlets to be

edited and distributed. Through Twitter (and Twitter multimedia-sharing services like TwitPic or TwitVid), everyday people are able to report on a specific occurrence. This content can be aggregated through websites en masse, or carefully dissected by bloggers or professional news outlets. (Carafano, 2009) This is important in combating the messages of state-sponsored propaganda.

Some may wonder just how much content is uploaded to Twitter on the subject of the Iranian election. One need look no further than Trendrr, a website devoted to “real-time social & digital media tracking”. On June 21<sup>st</sup>, there were over 440,000 Tweets posted to Twitter with the term “iranelection” (a popular trending topic at the time). To put this into perspective, if each Tweet was exactly 140 characters, the content produced on that day would fill a book of over 28,000 pages. While the sheer volume of content being posted alone is astronomical, many online efforts were organized through Twitter as well.

### **Organized Online Efforts through Twitter**

Many a layperson to the whole situation may have heard of the so-called “green revolution” that was happening through Twitter. Users were changing their profile icons to have a green tint in support of Mir Hossein Mousavi and the protesters. (news.bbc.co.uk, 2009) The origin of this can be traced back to the website helpiranelection.com, where any Twitter user could click a link and have their icon automatically changed to either a green tint or have a green bow added in the corner. As of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June, over 160,000 users had joined in to show their support. This was very important in bringing the message to the rest of the world, since it was such a drastic change to see one's Twitter feed filled to the brim with green-tinted icons.

To view the other side other side of the coin, this lazy action falls within Morozov's concept of “slacktivism”. Many people in the Western World wish to aid in global crisis situations, but oftentimes only until it becomes inconvenient or boring. Slacktivism is an idea where one can simply click a button to join a facebook group, and one's presence alone is enough to support a cause. Slacktivism is a

good tool for getting the word out, but ultimately it will accomplish nothing if no one completes any real actions towards solving the crisis.

Due to the sheer volume of Iran-related Tweets, there came the need for a filtering, or at least aggregating system. Several websites such as [iran.twazzup.com](http://iran.twazzup.com) appeared on the scene to offer compilations of tweets and other media from the Iran protests. These hubs were very important in making information available quickly and efficiently when a simple Twitter search would generate thousands of results.

Finally, thanks to the efforts of many to spread the word, many Twitter users outside of Iran began to set their location to Tehran to confuse the authorities there who were looking for dissidents online. (Heinz & Fletcher, 2009)

### **The Downside to Twitter**

Evgeny Morozov wrote a very compelling piece on the downside to the Twitter revolution. His main arguments were that Twitter did little for the positive for the protests, but instead made things more dangerous for the protesters. Morozov explains that the digital revolution we in the west are exposed to are far from the truth. In our frame of reference, every Iranian is 20-something years old and liveblogging the event from their iPhone. In reality, those on Twitter represent a “tiny percentage” which is “untypical” of the Iranian population (Morozov, 2009).

Morozov goes on to state that the protests were too organized and well orchestrated to be simply a bunch of Twitter rabble rousers. They were planned out events by Moussavi supporters rather than the spontaneous flash mobs that western bloggers would have us believe.

Although Twitter may represent a minority of Iranians, it presents a very dangerous sum of very public information. As easy as it is for a protester to see where the next demonstration would be, a government agent could do the same. What's more, these government agents could track down users and the government's legal action would “cost them dearly”. (Heinz & Fletcher, 2009)

The protesters aren't the only ones who are allowed to create twitter profiles as well; government agents can use Twitter to pass along fake information. The influx of Iranian government agents in Twitter was so great that Twitspam.com, a blog dedicated to rooting out commercial spammers through twitter, dedicated a page for "Fake Iran Election Tweeters".

On a massive scale, Twitter has been useful in getting the message out of Iran and placing the issue on a global pedestal. However, as an organization tool, it's far too public a forum to plan out protests or any anti-governmental activity.

## **Cyber-Warfare**

It was inevitable that when a demonstration grows to this size, information becomes a very valuable commodity. Just as there are efforts inside the social media by the government to restrict communication and promote their ideals, there are efforts in what some have called "hacktivism" on the part of the protesters. Generally, "the most common forms of attack include distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks, web hijacking or defacement, spam and limited attempts to introduce viruses" (Anderson, 2008).

In the case of the Iranian election protests, most of the known attacks were DDoS attacks on government websites to halt their propaganda (Schachtman, 2009). DDoS attacks are designed to overwhelm a website with requests until it collapses under the pressure. At least one of the DDoS initiatives were successful, as WIRED.com reported that government outlets such as leader.ir, ahmadinejad.ir, and iribnews.ir were unaccessible as of June 15<sup>th</sup>; a very quick turnaround if one looks at the June 12<sup>th</sup> election day. (Schnachtman, 2009) However, multiple sources have warned that executing these kinds of attacks on a network as young as Iran's could have destructive effects. Since Iran's network is so centralized, the government could have shut down the network if they had decided.

Why didn't they?

James Cowie explains that one could approach this question from three different points of view. The cynic would say that the Iranian government kept the Internet mostly intact in order to survey and round up dissidents. The optimist would say that the Iranian government would not dare shut off the Internet for fear of the economic turmoil it would thrust their country into. Finally, the realists believe that Ahmadinejad probably has too many flesh and blood protesters to worry about virtual ones. (Cowie, 2009)

Another effect of the centralized internet in Iran brings up another worry for DDoS attacks: since most communications are leaving Iran by only a few venues, any bandwidth-intensive activities could clog up the connection for everyone. This makes it difficult for important messages to leave Iran, thereby defeating the other protesters' efforts.

## **YouTube**

A less popular, but nonetheless crucial, social media tool in the Iranian dissident's repertoire. If a picture is worth a thousand words, a video is worth a million. YouTube offers a venue for uploading video content of varying qualities whether they be captured on a professional camcorder or a cell phone camera. The ability to share your first hand experience in a protest with a video will reach so many more people than if one were to simply describe the situation in text.

To give this some context, there have been over 600 videos uploaded from Tehran found through the query of "election". Although this sounds like a large number for video files, New York City, having roughly half of the population of Tehran, has uploaded over 1,900 videos to be found through the query of "election". (YouTube.com)

There are various issues that would prevent Iranians from uploading content to YouTube. First is the block on YouTube itself. YouTube, just like Facebook, Twitter and other social networking sites, are often blocked by the Iranian government. In fact, the week immediately following the election,

YouTube saw a drop in connections from Iran by about 90% thanks to a well-timed block by the government.(Stelter & Stone, 2009)

The second thing restricting content being uploaded to YouTube is bandwidth. In addition to outright banning YouTube, the Iranian government also caps bandwidth at will, causing extremely slow upload and download rates. Uploading very low quality videos becomes something of a trial, but uploading videos of decent quality become nearly impossible. Videos are one of the most bandwidth-intensive applications on the internet, and with a crippled connection, YouTube does not become the most favourable option.

## **Neda**

Although a direct connection from Iran to YouTube wasn't always perfect, YouTube proved to be a key supporter in the proliferation of the Neda video that caught the world's attention.

Neda Agha-Soltan was a bystander who was killed by a bullet wound on June 19<sup>th</sup> in Tehran. Her loss of life would have been a simple statistic had it not been recorded on video and sent out to various western news outlets as well as YouTube. The video soon had hundreds of thousands of views around the world and became the rallying point for many protesters both in and outside of Iran.

It's important to understand the impact of Neda's death. According to Trendrr, there were over 16 billion google searches for "Neda" in one day at it's highest point. On July 7<sup>th</sup>, there were 55,000 new Twitter updates posted in the #neda trending topic. By July 7<sup>th</sup>, there were almost 900 videos matching the query "Neda" to be found on YouTube, but as of the writing of this paper there are over 15,000 videos. (Trendrr.com) Additionally, the most popular upload of Neda's death clip on YouTube has almost 700,000 views. (YouTube.com) With these staggering statistics, one can do nothing but accept that her passing touched all corners of the world.

Although YouTube was not the vehicle of choice for the message coming from Iran due to many technical constraints put on it from the government, it proved invaluable in disseminating the message in the Bandwidth-rich west.

### **Blogging & Bulletin Boards (Forums)**

Weblogs, or blogs, are the one of the oldest of the social media platforms. They usually have more thought-out content than Twitter, and bloggers can choose whether they want to use their real names or pseudonyms. In Iran alone, there are over 700,000 blogs, with 100,000 of them being “actively maintained”. (Chiesa, Sukarya, Temes & Kageyama, 2008) Blogs are key in that they can be used for a variety of discussions and planning. One can post detailed information about an upcoming rally, as opposed to the 140-character missive shot out through Twitter on a small cellular keypad. One can also embed video and other multimedia right inside of the blog itself, which is very important if one is trying to get a message across.

Online Bulletin Boards (also known as online forums) have been around from since the beginning of the world wide web, and many people have the ability to set up forums to discuss different topics. Most forums require you register, and some allow you to be completely anonymous, like Anonymous Iran at [iran.whyweprotest.net](http://iran.whyweprotest.net). This forum allows for a completely anonymous method of communication for organization and discussion. The only issue with anonymity is that it's increasingly difficult to tell a government agent apart from a fellow protester.

Bulletin Boards excel at organizing conversation by containing it all in one place. While the dialogue on Twitter may be very difficult to discern who is speaking to whom, bulletin boards are very organized and offer a chance to have reasoned thought. Bulletin Boards also benefit from the ability to embed multimedia in it's posts, achieving a higher level of interactivity and engagement for their users. Finally, bulletin boards can be very local or very national; they can serve as a forum for discussing

neighbourhood affairs or international affairs. In this way, bulletin boards can facilitate organization very effectively.

While bulletin boards and blogs may sometimes be considered the older brother of new social networking tools, they still serve their place in organization and discussion.

## **Conclusion**

Due to the nature of the incident, official studies on what went on in Iran are doubtful at best. What scholars have to work with are the news reports, the Twitter updates, the blog posts, and the recorded effects of the DDoS attacks. While it is very difficult to say conclusively that social media were the direct proponents of x, y, or z, it would be foolish to deny them any stake in the effects of the Iran election protests. Would this issue have been brought to the world stage had it not been for the supposed “Twitter Revolution”? Would Neda's death have caused such a stir had it not been recorded on a cell phone and sent to social networks and news outlets? Did bringing down government domains help the protesters at all?

While the last question may lie in murky waters, it's obvious that social media has had an effect on the Iranian election protests, and if social media had an effect in a country where the internet was blocked, throttled, and guarded closely, one can only image what kind of an effect social media would have in a protest in the West.

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