

Iran: Downside to the "Twitter Revolution"

EVGENY MOROZOV

Among the unpleasant surprises that awaited Barack Obama's administration during the post-election turmoil in Iran, the unexpected role of the Internet must have been most rankling. A few government wonks might have expected Iranians to rebel, but who could predict they would do so using Silicon Valley's favorite toys? Team Obama, never shy to tout its mastery of all things digital, was caught off guard and, at least for a moment or two, appeared ill-informed about the heady developments in Iranian cyberspace. Speaking a few days after the protests began, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton confessed that she wouldn't know "a Twitter from a tweeter, but apparently, it's very important"—referring to Twitter, a popular mix between a blogging service and a social network that enables its users to exchange brief messages of up to 140 characters in length.

While Clinton's response must have pacified aging American diplomats, uneasy about the prospect of attending new-media workshops to bolster their Internet expertise, it didn't really comport with the popular narrative of events unfolding in Tehran, at least not the one constructed by the U.S. media. This narrative had come to be known as "Iran's Twitter Revolution." In the first days after the protests, it was hard to find a television network or a newspaper (never mind the blogs) that didn't run a feature or an editorial extolling the role of Twitter in fomenting and publicizing the Iranian protests. The modish take of the usually sober *Christian Science Monitor* is representative of the heavily skewed coverage: "The government's tight control of the Internet has spawned a generation adept at circumventing cyber road-

blocks, making the country ripe for a technology-driven protest movement."

Whether technology was actually driving the protests remains a big unknown. It is certainly a theory that many in the West find endearing: who would have expected that after decades of blasting propaganda from dedicated radio and television channels, Americans would be able to support democracy in Iran via blogs and social networks? Nice theory, but it has very little basis in reality; in fact, it is mostly American—rather than Iranian—bloggers who are culpable for blowing the role of technology out of any reasonable proportion. Andrew Sullivan, who was tirelessly blogging about the events in Tehran for the *Atlantic*, emerged as one of the few comprehensive one-stop shops for real-time updates from Iran (or, to be more precise, from the Iranian Internet). Sullivan (and the Huffington Post's Nico Pitney) made a significant contribution to how the rest of the media—cut off from access to the streets of Tehran and unable to navigate the new media maze as effectively as well-trained bloggers—portrayed the protests. It was Sullivan who famously proclaimed "The Revolution Will Be Twittered" and called Twitter "the critical tool for organizing the resistance in Iran." If Iran's Twitter Revolution needs a godfather, Andrew Sullivan has the best credentials in town.

It is easy to see why so many pundits accepted this narrative: they had seen something similar before. The exultant hordes of attractive, obstreperous young people, armed with fax machines and an occasional Xerox copier, taking on the brutal dictators—and winning: that already happened twenty years ago, and the venue was Eastern Europe. The parallels with Iran were too striking to resist. "Tehran's 'collective action cascade' of 2009 feels like Leipzig 1989," tweeted Clay Shirky, new media's favorite cheerleader, who is

always au courant with latest trends. In an interview with TED.com, Shirky claimed that “[Iran’s] is the first revolution that has been catapulted onto a global stage and transformed by social media.” However, as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, who were, perhaps, even more surprised by the high-tech protests than Obama, began their ruthless crackdown, the hopes of another “velvet revolution” quickly faded away, and virtually all pundits, including Sullivan, cured themselves of their Twitter obsession almost as rapidly as they had developed it. Tehran—caught up now in a bloodcurdling Stalinist show trial—had successfully deflected the Twitter threat, and the revolutionary spirit had been whittled down. What seemed like Leipzig in 1989 was beginning to resemble Beijing of the same year.

So, what to make of Iran’s Twitter Revolution? Has it upended any of our assumptions about the political power of the Internet? Plenty of skeptics think it was just a myth, dreamed up and advanced by cyber-utopian Western commentators, who finally got a chance to prove that the billions of hours that humanity wastes on Twitter and Facebook are not spent in vain. Critics counter that the failure of the Twitter Revolution doesn’t mean that new media didn’t play an important role in it. By bashing Twitter, we are blinding ourselves to the looming age of cheap and effective Internet-powered protests that will soon extirpate all forms of authoritarianism.

On first examination, the former charge has some merit. It is, indeed, quite easy to dismiss the Twitter Revolution as a product of the wild imagination—or, perhaps, the excessive optimism—of our self-anointed Internet gurus and visionaries. Many of them do offer superb analysis of technology’s role in national affairs. But they invariably flounder when it comes to analyzing technology’s role in global politics, offering a very parochial and superficial analysis of the situation. This is one subject area where they are severely inhibited by their lack of familiarity with foreign Internet cultures. Knowing something about local politics is not enough to understand the role that the Internet plays in a given context. Moreover, they often

can’t read the language and have limited information to work with.

Of course, they can still guess the nature and direction of the local conversations; their “cheat sheet” consists of following bilingual bloggers, who write in both their native language and English, and subscribing to blog aggregators like Global Voices Online, which purport to aggregate interesting conversations happening in non-English environments. The most curious and demanding could also use various machine translation tools that translate blogs from, say, Farsi to English. Some laud the emergence of this new media ecosystem: at what other point in history did we have a chance to tap directly into the thought process of young Iranians? It was the dwindling tribe of foreign correspondents that used to find those people for us and make them leading characters of their periodic, offbeat “Letter from...” dispatches. Today, the argument goes, we should thank Twitter for allowing us to follow them on a daily basis and in real time and—here is the punch line—to follow *all* of them, finally unshackling ourselves from the inherent biases of cigar-smoking and Martini-sipping white men.

In reality, however, this new media ecosystem is very much like the old game of “Telephone,” in which errors steadily accumulate in the transmission process, and the final message has nothing in common with the original. Judging by the flawed media coverage of the events in Tehran, the game never sounded more Iranian. Thus, to blame Andrew Sullivan for first dreaming up the “Twitter Revolution,” we have to blame a bevy of English-speaking Iranian bloggers who had shaped his opinion (many of them from the Iranian diaspora, with strong pro-Western feelings—why else blog in English?), as well as Farsi-speaking bloggers in Tehran who had shaped the opinion of the English-speaking Iranians, and so forth. Factor in various political biases, and it becomes clear that what Andrew Sullivan is “seeing” might be radically different from what is actually happening.

The traditional media, banned from reporting from Tehran (and, in many cases, unable to finance their stay there anyway), have to feed off the bloggers rather than do their own reporting or sift through thousands of often apocryphal posts from unknown writers.

This only amplifies the noise. Thus, it's hardly surprising that we are prone to see trends and developments that only exist in the minds of our local interlocutors. Learning from foreign blogs is a long and tedious process; it is largely useless in times of a crisis—who has time to read and translate blog posts when people are dying in the streets?—so it's quite logical that Twitter, with its 140 character limit and its cult of immediacy, has emerged as a key source of news and updates from Tehran. It is, indeed, a great shortcut to viewing the photos, videos, or text updates from the Iranian streets that resurface on our favorite blogs a few hours later.

However, by its very design Twitter only adds to the noise: it's simply impossible to pack much context into its 140 characters. All other biases are present as well: in a country like Iran it's mostly pro-Western, technology-friendly and iPod-carrying young people who are the natural and most frequent users of Twitter. They are a tiny and, most important, extremely untypical segment of the Iranian population (the number of Twitter users in Iran—a country of more than seventy million people—was estimated at less than twenty thousand before the protests). Whatever they do with Twitter may have little relevance to the rest of the country, including the masses marching in the streets. However, if these hip young people are our only way of getting information from the ground, it's quite natural that we also see them as “agents of change,” who must be instrumental in organizing the protests. On a purely cognitive level, we are quick to make the connection between the fact that there are thousands of people marching or demonstrating in the streets and the fact that these young peoples' Twitter updates are read by thousands (most of whom live outside of Iran). But this connection is imaginary.

To ascribe such great importance to Twitter is to disregard the fact that it is very poorly suited to planning protests in a repressive environment like Iran's. The protests that engulfed the streets of Tehran were not spontaneous nor were they “flashmobs”; they were carefully planned and executed by the Moussavi camp. The “flashmob” scenario may have worked in Moldova—the previous host of a “Twitter revolution”—where a dozen young people had,

indeed, transformed a flashmob into a massive rally earlier in the year. But Iran's protests were radically different; unlike Moldova, it had a well-organized opposition that was expecting the election to be rigged and was prepared to take action. That the Iranian opposition would venture into Twitter territory to deliberate about the best venue for its next march is ridiculous, not only because it seems pointless (after all, the Bolsheviks didn't have to use deliberative polling to choose the Winter Palace as their target) but because the Iranian secret services would probably read these deliberations before anyone else did—and then take preemptive action.

A Twitter revolution is only possible in a regime where the state apparatus is completely ignorant of the Internet and has no virtual presence of its own. However, most authoritarian states are now moving in the opposite direction, eagerly exploiting cyberspace for their own strategic purposes. Even technology laggards like North Korea are increasingly accused of harboring cyberwarfare ambitions. As it happens, both Twitter and Facebook give Iran's secret services superb platforms for gathering open source intelligence about the future revolutionaries, revealing how they are connected to each other. These details are now being shared voluntarily, without any external pressure. Once regimes used torture to get this kind of data; now it's freely available on Facebook.

Unfortunately, such nuances are lost on young Iranians and their foreign supporters; they happily exchange public messages with each other, creating a very dangerous trail of evidence that, sooner or later, could be used against them—in the case of Iranians, probably sooner, in court. Imagine a possible question: “How do you explain that a dozen suspicious Americans contacted you on Twitter? Are you a spy?” Well, it's certainly not the first revolution (albeit only a Twitter one) where well-meaning but extremely naive foreigners may have harmed their favorite causes. However, in the past one needed a fortune or, at least, a good name to cause much damage. Today all one needs is an Internet connection.

For example, realizing that one way to help the protesters is to clog the Iranian propaganda machine, some enthusiastic American *Twitterati* began sharing tips on how to attack the key news Web sites of the Iranian government. Their campaign quickly went viral. After all, what could be more exciting than the prospect of attacking the evil government of Ahmadinejad from the comfort of one's favorite café? Cyber-solidarity has never felt so good. What these cyber-soldiers didn't expect was that their attacks would also slow down the *entire* Iranian Internet, making it difficult to obtain *any* (even non-government) information or upload photos or videos from the protests. Thus, foreign supporters of the Twitter Revolution managed to do what the Iranian government couldn't: make the Internet unusable for activists. Another disturbing group that suddenly got its fair share of action in cyberspace were citizen vigilantes; blogs and Twitter accounts that looked "suspicious"—that is, appeared to be spreading "misinformation" about the venues and times of the protests as well as the reaction from authorities—were publicly named and shamed on dedi-

cated sites (Twitterspam.com was one such site). Getting off the lists was not easy; the *Twitterati* didn't have much tolerance or appetite for dissent.

This dark side of the "Twitter Revolution" didn't get much play in the media; nevertheless, it illustrates how poorly planned online activism can backfire. But harmless activism wasn't very productive either: what do 100 million people invited to join the Facebook group "100 Million Facebook members for Democracy in Iran" expect to get out of their membership? Is it just a gigantic exercise in collective transcontinental wishful thinking? Do they really expect that their "slacktivism"—a catchy new word that describes such feel-good but useless Internet activism—would have some impact? Slacktivists may successfully grapple with corporate PR outfits that have increasingly grown fond of polluting and astroturfing cyberspace; whether they will be able to topple authoritarian governments is less obvious.

While Iran's "Twitter Revolution" has proven to be a damp squib, members of the Obama administration have much to learn from it.

WWW.DISSENTMAGAZINE.ORG

Tyranny Comes to Tehran

Ladan Boroumand:
Show Trials and
Forced Confessions

Ramin Jahanbegloo:
A Reminder of
Moscow, 1936

Daniel Brumberg:
Should Iran Bury the
Islamic Republic?



Abtin Bitaraf / Creative Commons Attribution Sharealike 3.0

Before they get carried away with their immutable cyber-utopianism, they'd better study the role that the Internet didn't play as well as the reasons for it. Understanding how the Internet fits a particular political and social environment is one of the most intellectually challenging tasks facing the U.S. foreign policy apparatus in the next decade. So far, its members haven't even scratched the surface; what's worse, the utopian tech-enthusiasts who advise them are constantly steering the ship in the wrong direction. However, there might also be a silver lining to having the U.S. media overstate the case for the Twitter Revolution: thousands of Iranian young people may now want to experiment with Twitter and see what it has to offer. It's important that the old guard of American public diplomacy—entities like the Broadcasting Board of Governors—be fully prepared to satisfy these demands, embracing Twitter as a useful tool of generating and

spreading views critical of regimes like Ahmadinejad's.

Above all, the U.S. government needs to be prepared to radically rethink the role of cold-war-era institutions like the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe and deal with the fact that they may soon be less effective than the more nimble and popular platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Thus, it's not only its relations with key American nemeses that the Obama administration needs to reset; it's also how it thinks about the Web. Learning how to distinguish a "Twitter from a tweeter" would be a good first step; getting realistic about what the Internet can and cannot do would be a good second one.

Evgeny Morozov is a 2009-2010 Yahoo fellow at Georgetown University and a blogger for *Foreign Policy*. He's working on a book on how the Internet affects authoritarian states.

Beethoven in the Shadows of Berlin

Karajan's European Anthem

ESTEBAN BUCH

The musical symbol of the European Union is the work of a former Nazi Party member. How this happened and what it says about the new Europe is troubling. The European anthem is the instrumental melody of "Ode to Joy," from Ludwig van Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, first performed in Vienna in 1824. The European Council—the highest organ of the European Union, composed of leaders of EU member states—gave the melody this official status in 1985. The decision fulfilled plans for the song first laid out on July 8, 1971, in West Berlin by the Council of Europe, the first postwar European institution whose chief purpose is the defense of human rights. The official arrangement of the new anthem was conceived by the director of the Berlin Philharmonic, Herbert von

Karajan, who published the score under Schott Music, made a recording with the classical music label Deutsche Grammophon, and promoted it in the media with his orchestra. Karajan's arrangement is protected under copyright, and the copyright holder belonged to the Nazi Party from 1935 to 1945.

The anthem, however, is still Beethoven's music. Karajan's score is in D major, just like the finale of the *Ninth*, and it begins with a phrase lifted directly from measures 77 to 80 of the fourth movement of Beethoven's Opus 125. It continues with the melody played in its entirety by the violin section, then with a solemn march variation, exactly as in measures 140 to 187 of the original. It concludes *ritenuto molto* exactly like the cadential formula, which, in the choral part of the original, follows each stanza of Schiller's poem. However, the European anthem, which has no words, distin-

Copyright of Dissent (00123846) is the property of University of Pennsylvania Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.