How Social Media Can Shape a Protest Movement:

The Cases of Egypt in 2011 and Iran in 2009

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Introduction

This article will explore the effect of social media and Internet-based communication on social movements. It will do this by looking at two major processes of social movements—framing and organizing—in two case studies: the protests in Egypt from December 2010 to February 2011 (during the Arab Spring), and the post-election protests in Iran in 2009 that became known as the beginning of the Green Movement. The article will use this comparison and examination to determine how computer-mediated communication (CMC) was used in Iran in 2009 and in Egypt during the Arab Spring. These examples will also reveal whether CMC is most effective in framing a protest movement or organizing it; and to what extent this usage explains the success or failure of these protest movements.

It has often been popular, particularly in the media, to emphasize the impact of social media and the Internet in the post-election protests in Iran in 2009 and the Arab Spring of 2011. The Green Movement was often referred to as the "Twitter Revolution" during those early summer months in which revolution in Iran looked increasingly possible. The uprisings of the Arab Spring have also been described as "Facebook revolutions" or more broadly as "Internet revolutions." These conceptualizations have been equally vigorously countered, often by unlikely sources. In May 2011, Mark Zuckerberg—the CEO of Facebook—stated "It would be particularly arrogant for a technology company to claim to have role in the protest movements…. Facebook was neither necessary, nor sufficient [for these protests]" (Deglize 2011).

The effect of social media—and the Internet more generally—in both sets of protests is undeniable yet also distracting. Like most historic events, these protests and revolutions were in part possible due to a new technology. The Reformation in Europe was aided by the recent invention of the printing press; the revolutions of 1848 occurred in some respect thanks to the invention of the telegraph which transmitted news across Europe of one set of protests overnight; the age of modern terrorism, from the late 18th century onwards, came upon the world when it did due to the invention of dynamite. However, in all these events, technology does not explain the underlying causes that created them. A focus on technology can lead one to ignore the role of agency, for how technology shaped an event can only be understood by examining those who used it, and how they did so.

But even though social media and the Internet did not cause the Arab Spring and the fall of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, they clearly defined how and when these protests took place, and are thus of direct interest to this article. CMC creates a space between the public and private spheres that was clearly little understood by the authorities in these case studies. Technology allowed people to share not simply information about how and when to protest, but more importantly, to share images and videos that contributed to a different interpretation of events than that which the authorities themselves wished.

It is well known that social media and the Internet were widely used during the protests in Iran in 2009. Many individuals involved with the Green Movement and the post-election protests, as well as journalists reporting on the events, have attested to the influential role Twitter played. It was a major talking point in the western media, who themselves benefited from being able to see much of the organization of a protest recorded in written form. This excitement led to the term "Twitter Revolution" being used to describe the events in Iran, as illustrated in an editorial titled "Iran's Twitter Revolution" that ran in the Washington Times on June 16, 2009. But the western press was not alone in this assessment. Iranian scholar and expert on the Green Movement Nadar Hashemi praised social media tools such as Twitter because they "allowed organizers and activists to communicate among themselves without being detected…they allowed organizers to break the information blockade that the Iranian regime had implemented after the foreign journalists were kicked out."[1]

Similarly, CMC played a crucial role in the revolution of 2011 that ousted Mubarak. Although only 26.4 percent of Egyptians had Internet access, the widespread use of Internet cafés meant that CMC played a large role in Egypt's Arab Spring. For instance, the protest in Cairo on January 25, 2011 was organized on Facebook and reportedly had over 90,000 people signed up to its page (entitled "Day of Revolution") where details of the protest were made public. During the protest itself, the number of protesters was estimated to have been in the tens of thousands, implying that the event was of huge significance even though all the Facebook signees had not turned out. Notably, the Muslim Brotherhood would not officially participate, but the size of the protest suggested that in this case their organizational force had not been needed (Fahim and El-Naggar 2011). CMC was clearly perceived as enough of a threat to the government to push Mubarak to block certain blogs and phone networks, and on January 28, 2011, the Internet entirely (International Business Times 2011).

Although the use of social media and the Internet is not debated in these case studies, the extent of this use is. This article will explore how these tools were used, and to what effect. It will judge to what extent the success or failure of protest movements

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[1] Nadar Hashemi, interview by author via email, May 28, 2012.

can be attributed to the judicious use of computer-mediated communication. Thus it will not address the question of revolution, or even of why these protests occurred. Instead, this paper examines the methods and processes used by the protesters.

Conceptual Framework

The question of organization has invited new examination in the age of social media, blogs, and texting, known as computer-mediated communication. Also, the concept of "resource mobilization," a favourite topic of sociologists such as Charles Tilly, has come under review. The traditional resources of money and labor (among others) were notably lacking from the organizers of protests in Iran and the Arab Spring. Instead the necessary resources were perceived by many observers to be little more than a computer and an Internet connection. This discussion merely highlights the central importance of organization to a social movement. However, the focus in the international press on the "organic" and "grassroots" nature of the protests in the Arab Spring and Iran does not mean that these protests were not also organized. The Iranian scholar Kaveh Ehsani noted that in the Iran protests "of course [the protests were organized], but not in a traditional, vertical manner…The organization was horizontal, rather than vertical." And even in this horizontal structure he describes the existence of "layers of leadership."[2] A social movement cannot be understood without an examination of its organization.

However, a focus on organization and resources alone has never satisfactorily explained the success and failure of social movement. More intangible and evocative aspects, such as the role of slogans and speeches and the way in which they can frame a movement, have fascinated social movement scholars. The concept of framing currently lies at the heart of much sociological research, as well as in other disciplines, for it can be found in studies on psychology, linguistics, communication and media, and political science (Snyder 1999, 611). Within sociology, the frame concept can be traced back to Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of the Experience* (1974). However, it was not until the 1990s that social movement scholars fully embraced the framing concept. It was particularly driven by Robert Benford and David Snow, whose three conceptual articles on framing between 1995 and 2000 have been cited over 500 times (Benford and Snow 2000, 612). They deduce from this that framing processes have "come to be regarded, alongside resource mobilization and political opportunity processes, as a central dynamic in understanding the character and course of social movements" (Benford and Snow 2000, 612).

The concept of framing is a familiar one to those involved in communications work, and has much in common with the study of what some scholars describe as "political identity." Charles Tilly defined identity as the experience of a social transaction (with

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[2] Kaveh Ehsani, interview by author via email, May 28, 2012

the various obligations, expectations, ties and networks that evolve from these transactions) coupled with public representation of that experience (Tilly 2003, 49). In effect, he claims that organizers or leaders of social movements construct political identities and mobilize people with these identities to engage in collective action. A political identity is therefore "an actor's experience of a shared social relation in which at least one of the parties—including third parties—is an individual or organization controlling concentrated means of coercion" (2003, 61). Political identities should be viewed in terms of generation and constraint—i.e. how they were created, and what they inspired or limited people in doing (2003, 611-612). Invariably, a political identity relies on some sort of shared history, whether created, exaggerated, or real. When viewed in this light, "political identity" and "framing" are addressing the same phenomenon. In both cases scholars examine the "politics of signification" (Hall 2006, 64) of how movement actors are engaged in the "production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers" (Benford and Snow 2000, 623). However, "political identity" refers only to an event or a shared social relation. Framing, on the other hand, refers to a larger process that entails agency and implies that agency is directly connected to the work of social movement actors and the resistance they face.

The process of framing in modern social movements is increasingly relevant in the age of the Internet and social media. The new dynamic these technologies bring to the study of social movements should not be underestimated. As the Iranian scholar Asef Bayat (2005) makes clear, social movements in the Islamic world have not always been well studied by western academics. He claims that western scholars of social movements are grounded in technologically advanced and politically open societies and have often found it difficult to understand and research "activism in contemporary Muslim societies, which are often characterized by political control and limited means for communicative action" (Bayat 2005, 892). The use of the Internet challenges this conception, as communicative action is no longer so easy for regimes to limit. However, the Internet does not require us to fundamentally rethink social movement theory. Indeed, Bayat's argument for a more fluid understanding of social movements that looks at "imagined solidarities" between actors is in fact heightened by the arrival of new technologies. The Internet and social media have proved far more useful for social movements as tools for creating imagined solidarities, political identities, and general "framing" than as tools for physical organization.

The processes of organizing and framing are of course intertwined. A frame can inspire people to go out and protest while organization tells them how and when. Similarly, good organization of a protest that physically brings people together can create a sense of unity that in turn can be the beginning of a frame. The Google executive Wael Ghonim, who gained fame for his leadership and detainment by Mubarak's security forces during the 2011 uprisings, attests to this in his book *Revolution 2.0.* He writes about the effect that organizing a "Silent Stand" protest on June 18, 2010 had on its participants and Facebook followers. Even though the Silent

Stand had only 8000 participants (Reuters' estimate), the online infrastructure needed to organize it—a Facebook page, new Twitter links—was then used after the event to share photos and discuss what had happened. In an emotional post described by Ghonim in his book, he wrote:

> I did not think we would succeed, but I did what I could…now I have a story to tell my son and daughter when they grow up… all we did was reclaim our confidence and our certainty that we are united as one. (Ghonim 2012, 84)

He relates that traffic on this page increased "remarkably" in the days following the Silent Stand, such that the number of "likes" (each users can only "like" once) reached over 37,000—far more than the Silent Stand itself. Meanwhile "the nature of the comments [on the Facebook page] also changed significantly. The page developed its own culture, and its members began to feel that they belonged to a community" (Ghonim 2012, 82). Just as framing clearly aids organization and turnout, organization can provide the network necessary for frame diffusion.

Framing of Social Movements

This section will argue that CMC can be an effective medium for framing the aims of a protest movement. The concept of framing is important to understanding how some social movements succeed in attracting massive memberships at a point in time. Social movements should be viewed in a fashion similar to E. P. Thompson's notion of social class, which he described as a "*historical* phenomenon…not…as a 'structure,' nor even as a 'category,' but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships" (Thompson 1963, 9). Similarly a social movement is not simply an object; it is primarily a process, and should be studied as a historical phenomenon in a span of time. Framing is a process that can turn a group or an idea into a movement. Like coalition building, the concept of framing also points to deliberate measures by movement leaders to fashion consensus (in both cognitive and normative terms) by utilizing existing resources, techniques, means of communication and networking (Bayat 2005).

The Internet and social media have reinvented the process of framing. If framing is the process of giving meaning to occurrences and enabling individuals "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" occurrences within their life space and the world at large (Benford and Snow 2000, 614), then the Internet is the perfect tool with which to do this. It allows a protester, for example, to instantly comment on an event and circulate those comments to a wide audience. The ability to share videos and photos instantaneously enhances this framing ability. It is both the speed with which this sharing can be done and the ease of access to these tools, that makes CMC so powerful in the framing process.

A look at various tweets, blogs, and Internet posts created during the presidential election in Iran in 2009 and during the uprising in Egypt in 2011 show that CMC was

used for the two basic purposes explored in this paper: framing and organization. In other words, CMC was used to voice opinion on events and to give them a meaning that fit the protesters' narrative, or to simply organize where and when protests or related incidents were occurring. Consider, for instance, the difference between the following two tweets:

> Moussavi1388: *Please join Moussavi, Khatami and Karoubi tomorrow at 4pm from Enghlab Sq. to Azadi Sq. in Teheran for a crucial green protest #IranElections*11:31am (June 19, 2009)

> Persiankiwi: *The nation has awoken TODAY - the Sea of Green is marching - #IranElections* 12:40pm (June 20, 2009)

The first tweet, from a Twitter account supporting candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, is clearly an organizational notice that tells protesters when and where to meet. The second, however, contains none of those specifics and is instead a form of framing. This account user attempts to put the events of June 20, 2009 (the heaviest day of protesting) into a context that is both positive and revolutionary. Obviously, there were many blogs and tweets about the protests that fell into neither category—much of the Internet activity in Iran, for instance, seemed to be bemoaning the Iranian government's censorship measures and the lack of reporting on events in the media (Hare and Darani 2011, 102).

CMC has also changed who can generate a frame. The generation of frames has generally been less well studied than their effect, but it has frequently been assumed that frames are created by "movement leaders." Benford and Snow (2000) explain how discursive processes—which include all speeches, conversations, and written communication—are crucial to building an alternative meaning of events (framing):

> Frame articulation involves the connection and alignment of events and experiences so that they hang together in a relatively unified and compelling fashion… What gives the resultant collective action frame its novelty is not so much the originality or newness of its ideational elements, but the manner in which they are spliced together and articulated, such that a new angle of vision, vantage point, and/or interpretation is provided. (623)

What is remarkable about protesting social movements in the age of CMC is that they frequently do not have a clearly identifiable leader or even set of leaders. The framing process that has almost always been top-down is more opaque in CMC. It invariably occurs online and rarely comes from a single source. The "conversations" that are so key to the discursive process of Benford and Snow can now be played out in a sphere between the public and the private that potentially reaches a mass audience. Images and particularly videos can be used to frame events far more easily than in previous eras.

There is evidence of crucial differences between the Iranian protesters and those of Egypt and Tunisia during the Arab Spring. Egyptians spent the years leading up to the events of early 2011 framing their causes largely online and finally reached their revolutionary moment when a "master frame" appeared that united different social movement organizations (such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the labor movements, students, etc.). The constant use of blogs and other digital platforms for framing events in a narrative that depicted Mubarak as the source of all problems in Egypt was crucial for creating this revolutionary moment.

By contrast, Iranians relied on CMC for organizational purposes and engaged in far less framing. A word frequency of a sample of tweets sent in Iran between June 13 and 20 provides evidence of this lack of "framing":

Table 1: A collection of 773 tweets sent in Iran between June 13 and 20 2009[3]

Word	Weighted Percentage (%)
people	1.51
tehran	1.23
iran	0.99
mousavi	0.87
protests	0.77
police	0.74
reports	0.66
today	0.64
arrested	0.59
now	0.59
ppl	0.59
streets	0.59
confirmed	0.49
killed	0.48
students	0.47

The words that appear on this list are largely organizational: they seem to be relaying information rather than emotion. Words like "reports," "today," "arrested" and "confirmed" suggest that Twitter was largely being used by Iranian protesters to relay news about protests and clashes with the Iranian security forces. A search through these tweets confirms this finding which perhaps is due to the brevity of a tweet (which is limited to 140 characters). Overall, before the presidential election, protesters in Iran did not use this medium to frame their movement. However, Twitter is certainly not a convenient medium for writing notes that explain how events fit into

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[3] The sources of these tweets (Twitter itself does not archive tweets and the U.S. Library of Congress' archive is as of yet unusable) are from various websites, blogs, and recorded Twitter feeds that were collated by the author. The main web pages that have recorded these tweets are http://andrewsullivan.thedailybeast.com/2009/06/liveblogging-day-8.html and http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/blog/2009/jun/19/iran-unrest

a narrative (the Iranian government had effectively blocked Facebook and dissenting blogs, the forums for such notes, during the post-election period).

Conversely, the Egyptians (and Tunisians in this case) effectively used the Internet to frame their cause. While frame analysis demonstrates the existence and effects of an Egyptian master frame, it is worth describing its generation. The clearest roots of this generation are in the treatment of the deaths of the fruit seller Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia and the blogger Khaled Said in Egypt. Both events became issues around which protesters could unite. In both cases it was not simply the personal identity of the individual that provided a political identity for the protesters, but the circumstances surrounding their deaths. Khaled Said was dragged out of an Internet café in Alexandria and beaten to death by police in the summer of 2009 (Giglio 2011). He had apparently posted a video online of policemen dividing up drugs they had seized during a drug bust. The idea that someone who was not a traditional activist could be killed by the state for something he or she had said on the Internet clearly struck a chord with many Egyptians who saw this as yet another invasion by police of their private sphere. The slogan "We Are All Khaled Said" seemed in January 2011 to override divisions between labor unions and the urban middle classes. Similarly, the 26-year old student-turned-street-merchant, Mohammed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire on December 17, 2011, quickly became someone with whom many Tunisians could both identify and sympathize. The image of a young, educated man setting himself on fire due to constant harassment by the police was at the heart of what the protests in Tunisia were about. This form of protest also resonated with labor unions, which were partly pushed into protest by the flailing economy, and with more educated Tunisians who felt there were no opportunities for them. These political identities were powerful enough to override societal differences and drive revolutions.

These two incidents acted as a form of public history—a point in the recent past around which people could rally. This idea of creating a history, even of a recent event such as Bouazizi's self-immolation, is very common in social movements. As Tilly puts it:

> Public history is constructed, not, in the main, for the purposes of posterity or objectivity, but for the aims of present action (conquest, social reform, building, political reorganization, economic transformation). Narratives make claims for the virtues of their individual and institutional authors, often as counterpoint to rival claimants. They characterize the past in certain ways for the purpose of shaping the future. (2003, 613)

It is this public history that acts as the base for a frame or a master frame. The act of creating this public history is not passive, and blogs and Facebook groups (such as "We Are All Khaled Said") are essential to this process. The absence of such efforts in Iran was surely part of the reason for the failure of the protests there.

Iran lacked a strong master frame that had both prognostic and diagnostic aspects that was evident in the Egyptian case. The differences in frames have much to do with the particular history and situation in each case study. But we can see how, for instance, the recent history of dissent and protest in Egypt since the Kefaya movement in 2005 allowed for frames to be generated, tested, and then re-worked. The examples of Khaled Said and the Facebook groups and blogs that were created to protest his death demonstrate this fertile environment for frames. Egyptian activists used the Internet to create an "injustice" frame long before the mass protests in January 2011 took place, and had long made it clear that Mubarak was the reason for this injustice.

Iranians by contrast had no comparable build up to the elections. Press reports from the months prior to the election tell of disinterest and apathy among the electorate and few signs of activism. One editorial in an Iranian newspaper noted that "if a foreign expert visits our country in the current situation and watches TV, he will not believe that the presidential election will be held in Iran in less than two months" (BBC Monitoring Trans Caucasus Unit, 2009). Another observer more poignantly noted that it was "unlikely that Mir-Hoseyn Musavi's dialogue [would] awaken society's silent votes" (BBC Monitoring Middle East, 2009b). There was even discussion within Iran leading up to the election about the weakness of Iranian civil society (BBC Monitoring Middle East, 2009a). It is thus not surprising that, without a vibrant civil society of the sort that was developing online in Egypt, there was little literature or communication that had built an anti-regime frame.

There are other reasons for the failure of protesters in Iran to effectively unite groups as had happened in 1979. The imams were unlikely to desert the preferred candidate of Ayatollah Khomeini, and two labor union statements do not clearly reveal how many working class Iranians stayed loyal to Ahmadinejad, who himself came from a poor background (Anderson 2009). But the lack of a persuasive master frame—and prognostic framing—helps to explain why the Iranian protests did not advance after June 20, 2009. The brutal crackdown by the Iranian regime came too quickly for the protesters to develop a more potent and prognostic frame. The Egyptian protesters were simply more advanced, with many of them having protested six years before the Arab Spring in movements like Kefaya and April 6th. Egyptians also benefited from widespread discontent with Mubarak, although an effective master frame was necessary to unite this discontent. The Egyptian master frame, with both diagnostic and prognostic aspects, was what brought about the possibility of revolution. What was then required was effective organization, which will be examined next. The Iranian framing came too late, and in this regard the Iranians suffered from the spontaneity of their protests.

Organization of Social Movements

This section will look at how social media and CMC were used to organize the protests in both case studies. By "organizing," this paper refers to the logistical

processes of mobilizing social movement organizations, or more often the effort of simply mobilizing individuals. The concept of "organization" of a social movement and how it can lead to revolution was addressed in Tilly's *From Mobilization to Revolution* (1978). Tilly's work laid out a causal sequence from simple mobilization of a group of like-minded individuals to revolution. This work, and the literature that followed it on the topic of resource mobilization, addressed the question that this paper poses: how does a social movement appear and (possibly) lead to change or even revolution? The study of resource mobilization dominated research on social movements, particularly in the United States where the field attempted to understand the dramatic social movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Neveu 2005, 49). A study of modern social movements must clearly focus more on processes than resources. Indeed, the overriding narrative in the western media about many protest social movements since 2005 (including the Arab Spring) has been about the lack of apparent resources of the protesters. It has often appeared as if a computer and access to the Internet are more important today than the traditional resources of money and labor. But whilst this point can be debated—and this author would argue that many resources, like legitimacy, manpower, and technical expertise are just as relevant today as in 1960s America—there is no doubt that process has become more important. As Edwards and McCarthy note in their work on resource mobilization, "the simple availability of resources is not sufficient: coordination and strategic effort is typically required in order to convert available pools of individually held resources into collective resources in order that they can help enable collective action" (Edwards and McCarthy 2003).

The organization of social movements in Islamic countries is therefore primarily affected by two main factors. First, as Bayat reminds us, Muslim societies—particularly Egypt and Iran—have often been characterized by political control and limited means for communicative action. The second is that the rise of the Internet, social media, and other forms of CMC has been instrumental in making political control in these countries significantly more difficult. Social media like Twitter and Facebook allow social movement actors to communicate cheaply or even for free and to broadcast crucial information in a mass form for protesters. However, CMC is not a medium that can totally replace the organization of a social movement. Physical participation is not only needed, but essential (it was after all the size of the crowds in Tahrir Square that so shocked the regime of Mubarak, not the numbers of participants in the movements' many Facebook groups). CMC also creates an increased possibility for "free-riding," a concept that was best described decades before the Internet was invented, in Mancur Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action* (1968). He stated that individuals would not contribute to securing "collective goods" because of the superior rationality of "riding free" (Olson 1968, 76). This problem is only accentuated when movement "activists" can be part of a cause virtually, yet never have to physically meet other activists. Online participation can lead many people to unwittingly free-ride, feeling that online participation is enough, while this paper argues that online action alone is insufficient. Thus, the organization of social

movements in the age of the Internet still requires that movement activists engage in more traditional methods and processes.


Organization in Iran

 In Iran, social media—Twitter in particular—quickly became the main tool for organizing protests and avoiding the police and other government forces. The reasons for this were largely due to circumstances in Iran. The government in Iran went to great lengths to ensure a "blackout" around the protesters in terms of Internet access and media coverage. Foreign journalists were banned from covering the demonstrations—a measure that many presumed was taken to ensure journalists did not capture images of police brutality towards the protesters. The authorities also attempted to block all access to political blogs, either through cyber-security methods or through threats. The Revolutionary Guard reportedly demanded that Iranian websites remove any material that "create[d] tension" or the sites would face legal action ("Iran Widens Jamming of BBC as Revolutionary Guard Cautions Bloggers" 2009).

These measures pushed the protesters in Iran towards Twitter as a means of communication and organization. Twitter is different from social media sites like Facebook or MySpace or even blogs as it is not a self-contained world located on one website. For this reason, users do not actually have to visit a website to send a tweet; this can be done via text, email, or even blogging software. Similarly, tweets can be read remotely, meaning again the user does not have to visit a particular site to read content: they can receive them as text messages or read them on another site like Facebook. The implications of this are important, as this flexibility made Twitter all but impossible for the Iranian government to shut down. The government would have had to gain control of the server based in Wisconsin in the U.S. and shut down the entire worldwide service—an option which clearly was not open to them. Twitter does occasionally shut down for maintenance, and the company had indeed planned to do so on June 15, 2009. However, the U.S. State Department, recognizing the role Twitter was playing in the protests, requested that the company delay this maintenance until a time that would correspond to night time in Iran (Pleming 2009).

While it is undeniable that the main tool for organization during the Iranian protests was Twitter, its overall impact was doubtful. Of an estimated population of 70 million people, there were only 8,654 Twitter users in Iran in mid-May 2009. This number did increase dramatically as by June 21, 2009 there were 19,235 Iranian Twitter users. This number still only represents a miniscule fraction of the Iranian population. Also, there are reasons to suspect that this number may have been artificially inflated with users who registered themselves as being in Iran while actually being located

elsewhere.[4] Furthermore, 93 percent of Iranian Twitter users on June 21, 2009 were based in Tehran, as the graph below demonstrates:

Chart 1: Percentage of tweets sent with #iranelections by city

Source: http://blog.sysomos.com/2009/06/21/a-look-at-Twitter-in-iran/
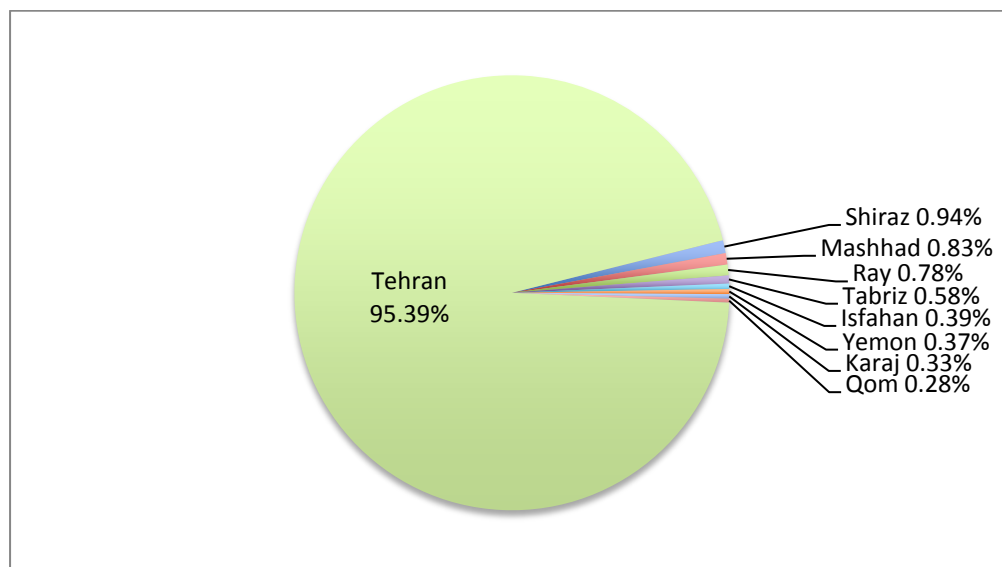
This information allows us to speculate in an informed manner about the nature of Twitter users in Iran after the election in 2009. They were few in number, urban, overwhelmingly focused in Tehran, and most likely educated. The level of education can be surmised from the amount of tweets that were in English, judging by the fact that a majority of the "buzz words" (most popular discussion words) were in English (although this does not necessarily mean that the majority of users were English speakers).

Furthermore, there is a more fundamental question about the effectiveness of Twitter as a tool for protest. As Twitter limits messages to 140 characters, a user is unable to send out anything more than the most basic information. Links to blogs and photos can be attached, but to read these one would have to have access to a computer rather than simply a mobile phone, and trust that the Iranian government had not blocked the linked-to site. The ease and frequency with which tweets could be sent could also have been a potential negative. While many of the tweets seem to have contained useful information, many others seemed to be only spreading gossip or rumors. For

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[4] Twitter bases a user's location on information that they themselves offer, rather than a GPS system. Thus it is perfectly possible, and very easy, for users to give the impression that they are located somewhere else, for example, by changing their time zone. There was an effort by protesters in Iran to confuse authorities by giving a location elsewhere and similarly by supporters outside of Iran to locate themselves inside Iran. Nevertheless, the trend between users before and after the election is still informative. For more information on the technical use of Twitter during the protests, see http://blog.sysomos.com/2009/06/21/a-look-at-Twitter-in-iran/

instance the following two tweets would have provided useful information for protesters:

> @naseemfaqihi: *Irish Embassy accepting injured, 8, BonbastNahid Street, North Kamranieh Ave, Between Niavaran and Farmanieh #iranelection* (June 20, 2009)

> @IranElection09: *Lots of fake Mousavi sites created 4 counter intel. WARNING THESE ARE FAKE: www.mirhoseyn.ir www.mirhoseyn.com SPREAD #iranelection 12:30 PM* (June 16, 2009)

In both cases, users shared valuable information about where injured protesters could receive treatment and what fake government websites should be avoided. However, the content of the tweets more frequently seemed to be similar to that of the following examples:

> @Change_for_Iran *it looks they are going to attack dorms again! IRG's chopper just passed by Yousefabad.there is nothing left 2 destroy!* 18:28GMT (June 16, 2009)

> @TehranBureau: *I have now received e-mails from totally trustworthy sources within Iran that many Sepaah commanders [Sepaph is IRGC] have been arrested* 10:29AM (June 18, 2009)

These two tweets are examples of how the platform was used for repeating hearsay. Either tweet could have been true, but it would have been impossible to verify the information at the time. It is thus difficult to see what value these tweets would have added for other protesters. Of course, Twitter is a selective service, and people receive tweets from users they have chosen or trust. But judging by the volume of tweets of this nature, it is difficult not to conclude that Twitter would have frequently been a confusing tool in these protests. The mass production of unspecific speculation of the sort highlighted in the above examples surely did not help organize or direct the protests. These vague details combined with the number of tweets in English raises suspicions that many of these tweets were either created by or for the Iranian diasporas outside Iran.

The use—even overreliance—of Twitter may have had other negative effects. Some have suggested that the use of social media created the illusion that would-be protesters were contributing to the movement when in fact they were not physically taking part. One journalist noted:

> One of the reasons that the Iranian Green Movement did not succeed in 2009 was that people mostly spread the word at home instead of actually going out and participating in the protests… a true study of the role of social networking in Iran might conclude that social networking websites can be blamed as well. ("Twitter Inhibited Green Movement Success" 2011)

Ehsani similarly noted that "corporate technology does not create a social action. In the end people have to come out, talk, coordinate, disagree, and put their lives on the line." Many Iranians certainly did do exactly that, as reports of the number of deaths of protesters range between 36 and 72 in the post-election protests and several more in assassinations or disappearances afterwards.[5] This paper is not able to substantiate a claim that social media, with Twitter in particular, inhibited the protesters. But it is similarly difficult to provide strong evidence that they were of much benefit to the opposition protests. Their main use seems to have been to report to the outside world the events in Iran and to involve the Iranian diaspora remotely in the protests.

Organization in Egypt

In Egypt there were important differences in the way the protests were organized and in the extended use of social media and the Internet. Egyptians, with a longer history of protesting, had learned valuable lessons about the efficacy of CMC as a tool from experiences such as the April 6th movement and its aftermath.

There are specific examples of how Egyptians used social media to organize the protests that ousted Mubarak. One such example is the mass protests of January 25, 2011, which at the time were the largest in the Arab world since the overthrow of Ben Ali in Tunisia on January 14. Information about the time and place of the protest was distributed via the Internet and particularly Facebook. Mubarak's government had long been monitoring political blogs in Egypt, arresting or threatening those who wrote blogs critical of the government (Faris 2009). However, the government did not see social media as a threat, as it was not specifically political. As Egyptian political activist Mohammad Mustafa explained, "the use of new technologies this time [January 2011] helped to spread the word out about this planned protest, to ensure a popular base of support for it and, thus, to assure those organizing the [January 25 protest] that there will be enough numbers of people supporting them" (Khamis and Vaughn 2011). The protesters involved in the organization of these January 25 protests attest to the value of social media technologies like Facebook as a way of sharing information at little or no cost. It was also more effective than more traditional methods such as posters or flyers because individuals received the news from their friends or social media contacts, so it was less likely to be ignored or thrown away like a leaflet. In this way, Egyptians benefited from social media in the

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[5] Estimates of the lower number of deaths come from the Iranian government ("Iran Official ("Iran Official Says 36 Killed in Post-vote Unrest," *Google News*, n.d., http://www.google.com/ hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5j8GPoWmrf2qerPWQNHb8Z9eGjT3Q.) and the higher number from the opposition ("Iran Opposition Says 72 Killed in Vote Protests," *Google News*, n.d., http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iaWYtGitSBRRBJkDanoZ1gwP4DBA.

same way that Iranians did, using it as a tool for sharing specific information about the time and place of protests.

However, Egyptians did not rely on social media to plan their protests in quite the same way as the Iranians had. As Mohammad Mustafa testified, Internet methods could not reach everyone: "Because not everyone in Egypt has Internet access, we had to also make sure through street activism that those who do not have Internet access could also be reached and that their sentiments are in support of the revolution" (Khamis and Vaughn 2011). This was done through collecting signatures, knocking on doors and physically meeting people, and other more inventive methods. In order to reach those people in Cairo's poorer neighborhoods where Internet access was scarce, some organizers used the city's taxi drivers (who often came from these areas) to spread the word. They would either tell the driver about their plans directly or conduct fake cell phone conversations about the planned protest whilst in a cab ("How Facebook Changed the World the Arab Spring" 2011). While this gimmick may have had only a minor effect, it does at least show that organizers were aware of the limits of relying on social media in a country where only 20 percent of people had access to the Internet.

It seems that in this regard Egyptian protesters were benefiting from previous experiences that the Iranians lacked, particularly the aftermath of the April 6th Movement in 2008. On April 6, 2008, Facebook activists were credited with organizing a general strike that seemed to herald a new age in online organizing. While the strike originated with textile workers in the industrial town of Mahalla al-Kubra, a Facebook group calling for solidarity with the workers and protesting skyrocketing inflation gathered 70,000 members, a number which surprised the organizers. However, the online organizing tactics that had seemingly worked so well on April 6 failed on May 4, when activists tried to organize a follow-up strike. The online support never materialized into physical demonstrations, and suspicions arose that the seeming success of the April 6 strike may have resulted from people staying at home out of fear of going into the streets on a day when government retribution might be strong (Faris 2009). The activists also seemed not to have agreed on tactics, or even agreed on anything more than the time and place of the protests. As one scholar of online protesting observed, "people knew they wanted to do something. But no one had a clear idea of what that something was" (Rosenberg 2011).

It is clear that Egyptian activists learned from this experience and started to focus on how they could broaden their reach and organize people to physically take to the street in an intelligent way. Many of them learned from successful protests and revolutions elsewhere in the world, a process in which the ability to communicate over the Internet with activists in other countries was invaluable. Some went so far as to visit other activists, like blogger Mohamed Adel, who met the Serbians who had overthrown Slobodan Milosevic at the Center for Applied Non Violent Action and Strategies in Belgrade (Rosenberg 2011). The result was significantly better organized protests both on January 25 and in the weeks that followed. One example of this

organization is an anonymous 26-page pamphlet written in Arabic entitled "How to Protest Intelligently;" the text was circulated both online and physically around Cairo after the January 25 protest. With the use of drawings and diagrams, the pamphlet covers where to protest, where the best escape routes from Tahrir Square are, how to dress for a protest, how to defend yourself from riot police, and other pieces of advice. It also instructs people to carry roses, chant positive slogans, gather in their own neighbourhoods, and persuade policemen to change sides by reminding them that their own families could be among the protesters. This pamphlet and others like it only reached a minority of protesters, but the obvious aim was that this minority would be enough to lead those who arrived in Tahrir Square spontaneously.

Conclusion of comparison of organization in case studies

Thus we can see that Egyptian protesters had an organizational effort that was supplemented by the Internet, whereas Iranian protesters relied on the Internet for their organization. This meant that when Mubarak's government shut down the Internet in Egypt, there was little effect on the organization of the protests. Having already used the Internet to raise the profile of their cause, the organizers and key protesters had less need for it. By contrast, there were complaints by some Iranian protesters that many people thought that the Internet could replace physical protesting. As some Green Movement protesters said, "sometimes people think taking a film through their window or sharing a statement on Facebook is enough and turned to be passive observers rather than active rebels."[6]

It is possible to attribute these differences in organizing tactics entirely to experience, particularly the experience that Egyptian activists had with the April 6th movement. Such experience was lacking in Iran (it has frequently been noted that the Iranian group with the most experience in protest and revolution was in fact the government, most members of which had helped overthrow the Shah in 1979).

The Internet and social media have not usurped the importance of resource mobilization in organizing a movement, but have merely altered the resources in question. Money, for example, is less necessary when the cost of organizing a protest is only that of using an Internet café. We can say that the low cost of online organizing has perhaps reduced the necessity of other resources (e.g. territory and facilities). This has seemingly made protesting easier. However this impression is misleading as the low cost of organizing also raises the possibility of free-riding. The case studies clearly show that organizing mass protests remains a difficult feat and one that cannot be achieved with a Facebook group alone.

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[6] Mahshid Zandi, interview by author, June 19, 2012.

Conclusion

This article has thus shown that the use of computer-mediated communication played an important if not conclusively decisive role in the protest movements in Egypt in 2011 and Iran in 2009. It has further shown that the Internet and social media were far more effective tools for framing a protest movement than they were for organizing it. Indeed, the Iranian case study demonstrates the perils of a protest movement that relies too much on tools like Twitter to organize on-the-ground protests.

This article also discussed the continued value of good organization to a protest movement. Whilst the Internet and social media may have theoretically made organization cheaper, they have not necessarily made it easier. Interestingly, this paper reveals that it was the Egyptian protesters' focus on traditional methods of organization, rather than relying on the Internet, that was largely to thank for the success of their movement. This focus was due to experience and/or awareness of previous protests like the Kefaya movement. In particular, the April 6th Movement had failed in part because the organizers assumed that online participation would naturally translate into physical participation. The Iranian case shares something in common with the April 6th Movement, as "free-riding" occurred in Iran, for some activists complained that many of their fellow protesters felt that the regime could be countered from the privacy of their houses rather than by taking to the streets. The paper also demonstrated that online organization can be confusing and contradictory, and thus should act as a supplement rather than a replacement for traditional methods. In addition to framing analysis, the use of the Internet should revive the study of how social movements are organized, and perhaps even make scholars reconsider the concept of resource mobilization. The technical ability of protesters to get around state-instituted online censorship, or expertise in social media of the sort that the Google executive Wael Ghonim demonstrated prior to Egypt's protests, are both key aspects of modern protesting. In order to better understand these protests, such intangible resources should be examined in place of more established resources like money and labor.

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