witter Revolution?

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"This is it. The big one," Internet culture expert Clay Shirky announced on June 16, 2009. "It's Twitter."[1]

Shirky was speaking four days after Iran's hotly contested presidential election, an event that has received almost as much attention for the potential role social media played in organizing opposition to its results as it has for, well, its results. He was not alone in his enthusiasm, nor was he the first to champion Twitter as a revolutionary force in Iranian politics. On June 13, Andrew Sullivan of *The Atlantic* wrote, "You cannot stop people any longer. You cannot control them any longer. They can bypass your established media; they can broadcast to one another; they can organize as never before."[2] On June 14, social media blog *Mashable* posted a guide to tracking the elections through Twitter.[3] On June 15, *The Nation*'s Ari Berman encouraged readers to "Forget CNN or any of the major American 'news' networks" and follow Twitter for breaking news on the opposition protests in Iran,[4] and the *New York Times* chimed in with an article on how "new kinds of social media are challenging those traditional levers of state media control and allowing Iranians to find novel ways around the restrictions."[5]

The initial rush of Internet-centered pride, however, was quickly followed by a new wave of media coverage, one considerably more critical of Twitter's role in Iran. As early as June 15, *True/Slant*'s Joshua Kucera wondered if Twitter was "leading us all astray":

> But what if it's based on a lie? A Twitter-fueled, mass delusion of a lie? That the one third of people who voted for [opposition candidate Mir Hussein] Mousavi convinced themselves, via a social media echo chamber that selectively picked rumors and amplified them until they appeared true, that they in fact represented two thirds of the country? And then tried to bring down the government based on that delusion?[6]

Rather than improving upon existing media coverage, Twitter provided a barrage of information, wrote Kevin Drum of *Mother Jones*, most of it unverified: "The overwhelming surge of intensely local and intensely personal views made it far too easy to get caught up in events and see things happening that just weren't there."[7] While some Iranians were using Twitter to spread news and encourage people to join protests, "most of the organizing happened the old-fashioned way," noted *BusinessWeek*.[8] On June 20, Noam Cohen of the *New York Times* admitted that the excitement over social media may have gotten out of hand: "Maybe there was no Twitter revolution."[9]

Journalists and new media experts continue to ponder what role, if any, Twitter played in the Iranian elections. As the Iranian government continues to keep bloggers in prison[10] and steps up its monitoring of Internet communications,[11] social media skeptic and Open Society Institute fellow Evgeny Morozov wonders, "What is the benefit of getting 100 young Iranians onto the streets via Twitter if the government reads the same tweets and knows who those youngsters are?"[12] In early November, technology blog *Valleywag* discussed new research on social media in Iran and criticized the social media-for-political-change hype in a post triumphantly titled, "The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted Because Only 0.027% of Iranians Are on Twitter."[13]

A weekly news interest survey conducted by the Pew Research Center shortly after the elections found that approximately 20 percent of Americans listed the story as the one they were following most closely. This is nearly twice the percentage that "very closely" followed news of Tony Blair's resignation, Tibetan protests against the Chinese government, or the conflict in Darfur.[14] In the same time period, 28 percent of news coverage focused on Iran. According to Ethan Zuckerman, a senior research fellow at Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, "When a story occupies 28% of the newshole, but only 20% list it as the story they're following most closely, it suggests that news media is pushing a story."[15] Morozov wondered if the coverage of the Iranian elections – specifically the coverage of Twitter – may have even taken the

focus away from the politics and history behind the event: "[The media coverage of Twitter] certainly made an impact in how the events were covered in the West," he told *Information Today*. "It probably stole from the protesters, because instead of discussing what was happening, a quarter of American media coverage was devoted to what so-and-so said on Twitter."[16]

Why has this story so captivated journalists and bloggers alike? It starts with CNN, which had the misfortune – or made the critically stupid editorial decision, depending on who is doing the analysis – to have its attention focused elsewhere on the weekend of the elections. Hungry for information on the elections' outcome and their aftermath, people turned on the television or visited CNN.com to see what was happening in Tehran. Instead of breaking stories on the post-election protests, viewers were treated to coverage of American's ongoing befuddlement concerning the switch from analog to digital television signals.[17] Angry news consumers took to Twitter, where they both found live coverage of events in Iran and expressed their frustration with CNN, labeling their tweets with the hashtag "#CNNfail." "Election went bad. Iran went to hell. Media went to bed. Ergo #CNNfail," wrote one user.[18] "Please break into your stupid reruns of old news and cover LIVE what's happening in IRAN. You are making yourself irrelevant," wrote another in a message directed at CNN's own Twitter account.[19] CNN took several days to publish an article on the riots, instead leading their Iran coverage with a story on a planned rally in support of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory.[20] By the time they reported on the demonstrations, #CNNfail had become one of the most popular topics on Twitter, and the network's credibility had suffered an enormous blow.

Many of those writing about CNN's disastrous lack of election coverage recalled the network's earlier strength in reporting breaking international news. The Tiananmen Square massacre and the first Gulf War, both events CNN covered live, were repeatedly mentioned as victories for the network: "Remember almost 20 years ago, on that first night of the first Gulf War,

when everyone gathered around TV sets to listen to CNN's John Holliman and Peter Arnett describe Iraqi anti-aircraft guns desperately trying to shoot down U.S. bombers?" wrote E.B. Boyd of *BayNewser*. "CNN's reporting was revolutionary at the time."[21]

The Tiananmen Square massacre and the first Gulf War served as what Barbie Zelizer labels "critical incidents," events during which CNN's journalists "improvis[ed] within the configuration of different circumstances and new technologies to meet ongoing demands for information."[22] Boyd writes, "Holliman and Arnett (and anchor Bernie Shaw) were holed up in a hotel (taking cover under beds at times), but thanks to modern technology, they were able to bring everyone in the U.S. (and around the world) over to Baghdad and experience exactly what it was like to be in a city under siege."[23] Holliman and Arnett's determination to report no matter what the circumstances gave CNN a journalistic authority that was nearly unquestionable.

The events in Iran served as a different kind of critical incident: one that, rather than building on CNN's credibility, severely damaged it. Instead of adapting to and utilizing new technologies, CNN's reporters were oblivious to them. Instead of relying on professional journalists for news, audiences were mocking them.

"Journalists function as an interpretive community, a group that authenticates itself through its narratives and collective memories," writes Zelizer.[24] The Iranian elections threw a new and uncomfortable narrative into the mix: one in which professional journalism fell behind a new – if somewhat unreliable – form of reporting. Even if obtaining useful information from Twitter meant paging through hundreds of tweets, at least the information was available. Those news outlets that were reporting on the riots were scrambling to do so, drawing much of their coverage from citizen media while often compromising on traditional journalistic values of fact-checking and source verification. "Many mainstream media sources, which have in the past been critical of the undifferentiated sources of information on the Web, had little choice but to throw open their doors

in this case," wrote the *New York Times*' Brian Stelter.[25] This process added journalists' ongoing reinterpretation of themselves and their role in the story. Through all of this, CNN was sadly silent. "Twenty years ago CNN's coverage of Tiananmen Square made its reputation. If in twenty more years it has become consensus that real-time, online, crowdsourced media is the best place to keep up with current events, this incident could be an important part of that history unfolding," wrote Marshall Kirkpatrick for the *New York Times*.[26] The fact that the media has been unable to let go of Iran's Twitter revolution may be a sign that Kirkpatrick is right.

While the media's own self-interest likely contributed to the heavy coverage of social media use during and after the Iranian elections, and while the incident challenged the credibility and identity of professional journalists, the story itself helped generate a community that went far beyond those reporting it. On June 15, Andrew Sullivan changed the color scheme of *The Daily Dish*, his blog on *The Atlantic*'s web site, to green. "We switched the color scheme in solidarity," he wrote, referring to the green clothing and accessories worn by Mousavi's supporters. "Wear green if you can. They need to know we care."[27] Within several days, millions of Twitter and Facebook users – ranging from college students and middle-aged Midwesterners to White House correspondent Ana Marie Cox – had tinted their profile photos green.[28] Twitter users also changed their profile location to Tehran and their time zone to GMT +3:30 in an attempt to shield actual protesters on the site from Iranian authorities.[29] People with no prior ties to Iran – no family or friends in Tehran, no degree in Middle Eastern history hanging on the wall – suddenly felt a deep personal connection to the country. When Twitter announced it was planning to undergo regularly scheduled maintenance on June 15 during daytime hours in Tehran, tweets containing the #nomaintenance hashtag flooded the site (the State Department ultimately contacted the service asking them to delay the procedure until the middle of the night, Iranian time – daylight hours for the United States – and Twitter complied[30]).

Benedict Anderson contends that mass media, by highlighting the simultaneity of events as disparate as a "famine in Mali, a gruesome murder…and a speech by Mitterand," contribute to imagined linkages between far-away people and places.[31] These linkages form a "nationally imagined community" composed of people who speak the same language and consume the same media, despite often vast geographical distances.[32] Anderson is writing in 1982, long before the Internet reached three quarters of Americans and nearly a third of Iranians,[33] but his theories can be extrapolated to the globalized and interconnected world of June 2009. In this world, Twitter users oceans apart formed a single community, bound together by the seemingly endless stream of English-language information flowing from Iran. The green profile pictures serve as a visual marker of this community, and the "no maintenance" movement demonstrates an understanding of simultaneity as well as a sense of shared space and time. Commenting on the outpouring of solidarity, Clay Shirky emphasized the role of online social media: "Reading personal messages from individuals on the ground prompts a whole other sense of involvement…. Twitter makes us empathize."[34] The mainstream media reflected and enhanced this community, with headlines like "Green reflects solidarity with Iran protesters on Twitter," "They took the Web and painted it green," and "Internet brings events in Iran to life."[35]

The greening of Twitter drew a fair amount of criticism, mostly from prominent bloggers. Kate Crawford of ABC Australia points out, "the greenwashing of Twitter appears as just another example of emoticon politics: where we allow a symbol to stand in for any real action or feeling. Twitter users stand accused of allowing an aenemic proxy to replace any kind of genuine political action, while they continue the business of everyday life."[36] Andy Borowitz mocked the movement in *The Huffington Post* with a satirical article titled, "Ayatollah: Green Twitter Avatars 'Number One Threat' to Regime."[37] Describing HelpIranElection.com, a web site that "boasts that you can

add a green overlay with 1-click!' and that 'over 160,000 people have joined! You can too!,'" Kase Wickman, also of *The Huffington Post*, argues, "One click is too easy. One click is not one life saved, one dollar donated, not one ounce of difference made. One click is nothing at all…. At least when people bought those stupid [Lance Armstrong LiveStrong] wristbands, a buck went to fighting cancer."[38]

Writing in *Foreign Policy* in May 2009, Evgeny Morozov defined "slacktivism" as "feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact." He went on to incriminate the media as a partner-in-crime for slacktivists: "Given the media's fixation on all things digital – from blogging to social networking to Twitter – every click of your mouse is almost guaranteed to receive immediate media attention, as long as it's geared towards the noble causes."[39] Skeptics of foreign support for the Iranian opposition viewed those who tinted their Twitter and Facebook avatars green as a prime example of slacktivists. Their criticism echoes Robert Putnam's thoughts on the "strange disappearance of social capital and civic engagement in America."[40] In 1995, Putnam blamed television for a decline in social participation: "TV watching comes at the expense of nearly every social activity outside the home," he wrote. The same thing has also been said of the Internet, notably in a 2002 study conducted by Stanford University researchers Norman Nie and Lutz Erbring that found that "the more time people spend using the Internet, the more they lose contact with their social environment."[41]

"Some of the same freedom-friendly technologies whose rise [political scientist Ithiel de Sola] Pool predicted may indeed be undermining our connections with one another and with our communities," Putnam frets.[42] This is a fear that Morozov, Case and others apply to the Internet, specifically to the use of Twitter surrounding the Iranian elections. In an article in the Fall 2009 issue of *Dissent*, Morozov describes Iran's "Twitter Revolution" as 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."[43] Must one be a "cyber-utopian" to believe that Twitter played some significant role in the events in Iran, though? Michael Schudson, in a response to Putnam, argues that "the political may be intense and transient" – adjectives that certainly apply to the torrent of 140-character-or-less messages flying around the Internet in June 2009.[44] "Better to conceive the changes we find as a new environment of civic and political activity with altered institutional openings for engagement," he writes. Though he is making his argument in 1996, Twitter – developed a decade later – can easily be seen as one such "altered institutional opening," allowing anyone with an Internet connection or a cell phone to consume and circulate not only news of political events but also political messages, ranging from "Dear UN & NGOs, why is Iran allowed to butcher civilians without even a word from you?" and "Democracy is our right, we despise violence" to, yes, a photo of herself shaded green.[45]

The argument over the usefulness – or worthlessness – of social media in Iran is not new. The same debate took place in the weeks after Moldova's April 2009 elections, branded the first ever "Twitter Revolution" by none other than social media skeptic Morozov himself.[46] He was quickly followed by the Agence France-Press, popular technology blog *TechCrunch*, and the *New York Times*, which credited Twitter for the "crowd of more than 10,000 young Moldovans" that "materialized seemingly out of nowhere" to protest against the country's Communist government.[47] Shortly thereafter, Morozov found himself defending his use of the phrase ("Moldova's Twitter Revolution is NOT a myth," read the *Foreign Policy* headline), while Anne Applebaum published "The Twitter Revolution That Wasn't" in the *Washington Post*, *Slate*, and on her own blog.[48] *Boing Boing*'s Xeni Jardin appropriated the meme in *GOOD* magazine during Guatemala's May 2009 political unrest;[49] I myself am guilty of propagating it – on Twitter, no less – in Uganda after the September 2009 riots in Kampala.[50]

Ironically, none of the so-called "revolutions" in Iran, Moldova, Guatemala or Uganda have lead to substantially different governments. Rather than reflecting actual politics, the Twitter Revolution seems to be largely a product of the media, both mainstream and social. "Western journalists shifted their focus from the role of Iranian people to the role of technology," writes Ethan Zuckerman.[51] As mentioned above, 20 percent of Americans followed the Iranian election story more closely than any other story in June. Meanwhile, 60 percent had heard of the role Twitter played in Iran.[52] I tend to agree with anthropologist Maximilian Forte, who conducted a study of the election-related tweets and related media coverage between June 13 and 17, 2009. Forte's research led him to conclude: "This is indeed a 'revolution'…but it's for Twitter."[53]

NOTES

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