

# THE BOUNDARIES OF DIGITAL ACTIVISM: DISSIDENT USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN IRAN

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This paper examines the various ways Internet social media networks and new media were used in the June 2009 Iranian demonstrations following the contentious presidential election, the effectiveness of these media in mobilizing and informing domestic and international audiences, and the implications for freedom of speech, democratic norms, and human rights in Iran. While social media played an important role in providing news and images to the global audience, its domestic use was limited due to widespread distrust and government censorship. Although new technology and digital activism enabled a flow of information that would not traditionally exist in a closed society, the contributions to Iranian democracy and human rights were negligible and possibly even harmful.

## WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

Social media is distinct from traditional media such as newspapers, broadcasting, cable television, radio, and film. Whereas traditional mass media can be characterized as “one to many,” social media transforms the conversation into a “many to many” dialogue by facilitating social interaction via relatively new technologies, such as the Internet. Social media’s accessible and interactive publishing techniques mean that content is easily produced and information is widely available. Through social media networks and new media technology, individuals, formerly content consumers, become content producers (Benkler 2006). Social media builds on the capacities of Web 2.0 tools that facilitate user-centered design and

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content production through web-based communities, forums, and applications, video and image sharing sites, wikis, and blogs (Clark 2009).

Building on the capacities of Web 2.0 tools, social media is distinct from traditional media in five important ways: it is global, instantaneous, highly accessible, interactive, and alterable (Benkler 2006). Social media has a global reach and can relay news and information almost instantaneously. Unlike mass media, social media is relatively inexpensive, requires little capital investment or resources to publish information (e.g., a printing press), and is accessible to an increasingly large number of the global population. Social media facilitates interaction between users and readers by enabling discussion, commenting, and editing. It is more participatory than, and lacks the permanence of, older media.

“Citizen media” is a term closely tied to social media and new media technologies. It is produced by private individuals who have no official political, social, or corporate affiliation and emphasizes public issues that are often absent from mainstream mass media, and often has a partisan bent. Citizen media empowers individuals to produce their own politically- and socially-motivated content. Andrew Shapiro argues that the emergence of new digital technologies signals “a potentially radical shift of who is in control of information, experience, and resources” (Croteau, 2003, 322)

New media have significant connections to and implications for globalization: they “radically break the connection between physical place and social place, making physical location much less significant for our social relationships” (Croteau 2003, 311). Global movements using these new participative technologies allow diverse networks of participants to collaborate, problem-solve, and discuss regardless of their geographic location.

## FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND EXPRESSION IN IRAN

Article Twenty-Four of the Iranian constitution states that while “publications and the press have freedom of expression,” it is unlawful to express views that are “detrimental to the fundamental

principles of Islam or the rights of the public.” The Iranian Press Law of 1986 further clarifies unlawful media activity, which includes “promoting subjects which might damage the foundation of the Islamic Republic” and “offending the Leader of the Revolution and recognized religious authorities” (Open Net Initiative 2009). Violators face criminal prosecution, months of incarceration, torture, and even the death penalty. Ethnic-minority journalists are specifically targeted for harsh punishment: in 2007, two Iranian Kurdish journalists were given the death sentence after being declared “enemies of God” and suspected of endangering national security (Freedom House 2009). Journalists and bloggers who support issues deemed “controversial” by the regime were also targeted, as were individuals with actual or suspected connections abroad.

Open Net Initiative, an academic project that studies Internet filtering, finds the Iranian press legislation to be unusual “in that it not only describes restricted speech but also lays out normative objectives for the press, who are required to ‘propagate and promote genuine Islamic culture and sound ethical principles.’” In May 2009 Freedom House ranked Iran 181 out of 195 countries for media openness—tied with China and Rwanda, and below Syria, Sudan, and Somalia. The strict laws regulating the freedom to express political and moral ideas have led to complete state control over domestic newspapers, press, radio, and television. The Ministry of Culture must approve the domestic publication of all books, and inspects foreign books before their distribution. The Press Court has discretion to prosecute journalists, editors, and publishers based on its interpretation of constitutional stipulations such as “insulting Islam” and “damaging the foundations of the Islamic Republic.” In just the first few months of 2008, the Court banned seventeen newspapers (Freedom House 2009).

The government also frequently issues gag orders that limit coverage of specific topics and events. Before the 2009 presidential election, foreign correspondents were expelled from Iran and domestic journalists were strictly censored and even jailed. One month after the elections and protests, nearly forty journalists still remained in Iranian prisons (Reporters Without Borders 2009).

The Ahmadinejad government has made it clear that the media's duty is to support government policy and not to provide commentary or hold officials accountable for their actions. Pervasive fear among journalists has created an environment of self-censorship, inhibiting public criticism of the president and regime (Milani 2009). In 2007, the Iranian Journalists' Association (IRNA) reported that the quality of domestic journalism suffered due to the government's crackdown on independent newspapers. The government has systematically and persistently harassed the IRNA, pressuring it to include pro-government journalists (Freedom House 2009).

The number of Internet users in Iran increased from 7.5 million users in 2005 to twenty-three million in 2008—almost twenty-five percent of the population (Open Net Initiative 2009). Originally, the government censored Internet content by forcing service providers to block access to a growing number of sites deemed immoral or politically controversial. In 2006, the authorities created a central filtering system to block these websites, identify domestic Internet users, and keep a record of visited sites. As of January 2007, Iranian bloggers were also required to register with the government—a formidable feat given the estimated 60,000 active writers in the Persian blogosphere (Open Net Initiative 2009). In July 2008, a bill legalizing the death penalty for “the creation of weblogs and websites promoting corruption, prostitution and apostasy” was passed by the parliament. Under this law, Iranian-Canadian blogger Hussein Derakhshan was arrested in Tehran during a visit in November 2008 for “insulting religious figures” (Freedom House 2009).

The government has implemented its filtering system by routing all public Internet traffic through proxy servers. This allows filtering software to target specific webpages and to block keywords. The government openly admits that it blocks these websites in order to demonstrate its power over information. Users that attempt to access a blocked site reach a page warning them that they are not permitted access (Open Net Initiative 2009). In 2008 and 2009, ONI tested five Internet service providers in Iran: ITC, Gos-

tar, Parsonline, Datak, and Sepanta. The results confirmed that the extent of Iran's Internet filtering is second only to China. Iran filters a broad range of websites deemed offensive to the moral standards of Iran; for instance, those in support of women's rights groups, minority rights groups, government critics, human rights organizations, and political opposition and reformist parties.

The government has also limited Internet speeds for public organizations and private households. Before this policy was implemented, fiber-optic networks had been expanding rapidly in Iran, more than doubling from 2005 to 2007. Mohammad Soleimani, the Minister of Information and Communications, publicly defended the limited access speeds, stating that slower speeds were adequate for the country's needs and that there was no demand for higher speeds (Tait 2006). Iran remains the only country in the world to implement a limit on access speeds for private households.

The government often threatens legal and violent action against Internet dissenters, and increasingly it follows through on these threats. Although the Iranian constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, they are relatively routine practices. Government officials use arbitrary detention and intimidation to encourage self-censorship by professional and citizen journalists. Use of torture against dissidents is suspected in both the unofficial detention centers and the notorious Evin prison (Penketh 2009). A 2004 law outlawed the use of torture in interrogations, but reports from 2008 have shown the practice has persisted. Political prisoners are subjected to inhumane conditions and brutal treatment, and those who advocate for their rights are also subject to persecution (Freedom House 2009).

At the same time as it limits public access, the government has also started to use the Internet to promote its own ideology and extend its authority. The Revolutionary Guard recently declared a campaign to launch ten thousand blogs written by members of the Basij, a volunteer Iranian paramilitary force (Bruno 2009). The government has also actively spread pro-regime propaganda and misinformation about dissidents over the Internet. This suggests

a new policy directed at shaping an Internet presence favorable to the regime: an active, government-backed Internet campaign specifically targeting dissidents, opponents, and critics.

## JUNE 2009 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

An unprecedented number of voters turned out for the June 2009 Presidential elections. The results were rejected by all three opposition candidates. Following the June 13 declaration of incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the winner with 63 percent of the vote, widespread protests took place across Iran, particularly in Tehran, and in major cities around the world (Worth 2009). The police reacted violently to the protesters, many of whom were students, women, young activists, and supporters of the opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi. Whether or not the election results were in fact fraudulent, the demonstrators' use of new media reveals valuable information about how information-sharing technologies, social networking, and new media can support mass mobilization and political demonstrations in the face of state censorship and suppression.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei declared the historic voter turnout a "divine assessment" of Ahmadinejad and urged the nation to unite in support of the results, but was later forced to investigate the claims of fraud in the face of domestic and international pressure. Ahmadinejad called the election "completely free" and the outcome "a great victory" for Iran (BBC 2009).

The police and the paramilitary Basij suppressed both peaceful demonstrations and the increasingly violent riots, using a variety of weapons and firearms. The Iranian government has confirmed the deaths of thirty-six people during the protests, while supporters of opposition candidate Mousavi allege that there were seventy-two deaths in the three months following the disputed election. Iranian authorities further suppressed the movements by closing universities in Tehran, blocking web sites, intercepting cell phone transmissions and text messaging, and banning political rallies. As of August 2009, the Iranian government confirmed that over 4,000 people were

temporarily detained during the protests (AFP 2009).

According to the *Telegraph* on June 14, "Iran's regime was doing its utmost to choke off the flow of news" to other areas of the country and the world (Blair 2009). Al-Jazeera English accused the government of direct censorship, stating that "some of the newspapers have been given notices to change their editorials or their main headlines" (Blair 2009). The al-Arabiya offices in Tehran were closed on June 14 for a week, and NBC News offices in Tehran were raided and equipment confiscated. Peter Horrocks, director of BBC Worldwide, said that audiences across the Middle East and Europe were affected by an electronic block on the satellites used to broadcast the BBC Persian Television signal, which, Horrocks said, "seems to be part of a pattern of behavior by the Iranian authorities to limit the reporting of the aftermath of the disputed election" (Horrocks 2009). Further corroborating this statement, the Iranian Ministry of Culture banned all foreign media journalists from leaving their offices on June 16. While international news agencies could still report on the elections and protests, they were not allowed to directly witness the demonstrations. On June 20, the Ministry of Culture further banned the international media from issuing reports on what was occurring without explicit permission from the Iranian government (Reuters 2009).

Nearly 35 percent of the Iranian population are active web-users, the Internet and new media played a role in both the election process and the resulting demonstrations, acting as primary source of information and news for domestic and international audiences (Open Net Initiative 2009). Websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube helped the opposition movement share the government's brutal response with a global audience.

As the Iranian government limited traditional news networks' ability to report from the field, citizen journalists on the streets used new technology, such as cell phones, to share news, images, and videos of the protests via the Internet. Iranian officials have attempted to deflect blame onto these new media, and accuse the West and foreign media of backing the political opposition in order to undermine the Islamic government.

## CAUSAL MECHANISM OR PROTEST TOOL?

Months after the election, the causal role of social media in organizing protests is still disputed. The “Twitter revolution” argument holds that social media was remarkable and innovative, and responsible for bringing protesters together (Fisk 2009). Another point of view argues that the use of the Internet as rather a tool of citizen journalists to share news and images—that would otherwise be suppressed both domestically and internationally. A third interpretation is that the use of social media to increase free speech actually hindered democratic movement and increased government repression and human rights violations.

In order to evaluate the role of social media in response to the Iranian elections, the mechanisms through which it contributed to the protests need to be understood and its effectiveness evaluated. Only then will the implications for freedom of speech, democratic norms, and respect for human rights become apparent.

### Communication and Mobilization of Protestors

Perhaps nothing is more illustrative of Twitter’s perceived value as a communicative tool between Iranians as when the U.S. State Department asked Twitter to postpone scheduled maintenance so Iranians would have access to the service during the street protests (Labott 2009). Texts and images calling for “death to the dictator” were widely distributed through email and posted on YouTube, and Facebook, and Twitter, creating the illusion of a collective resistance of media-savvy young people at the forefront of a political uprising similar to 1979’s. The foreign press promoted this image of a “Twitter revolution” to the international audience (Sullivan 2009). In reality, however, extensive government censorship, infiltration, and blocking limited the role social media played in mobilizing protestors within Iran (Schechtman 2009). While protest organizers were sometimes able to temporarily bypass government censors, the larger population, wary of the new technology and of potential government infiltration, often distrusted mobilization at-

tempts through the Internet.

Sysomos, a blog, analyzed the use of Twitter in Iran during this period. After the election, there were 19,235 Twitter users in Iran, compared to the 8,654 in mid-May 2009. Sysomos determined the number of users by re-indexing over thirteen million Twitter accounts. They used information provided in user profiles as disclosed in May (for users who joined before June) to determine the location of users, in order to avoid counting those who changed it later to Tehran to protect and support protestors. Sysomos also looked at when Twitter accounts were created over the past 15 months. The number of Twitter users in Iran grew in 2009, with March and June the most active months, when 9.81 percent and 9.93 percent of all Twitter accounts were created, respectively (Sysomos 2009). However, these numbers only show that more people in Iran were using Twitter during this period, and not that they were using it specifically for mobilization or communication connected to the protests.

In fact, Iran experts and social networking activists say that while Iranian protesters have used social media tools, no one technology has been instrumental to organizers' ability to mobilize. Most of the protest organization was done through SMS text messages and word of mouth. "Social media is not at all a prime mover of what is happening on the ground," said Ethan Zuckerman, a senior researcher at Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet & Society. "Social media are helpful in exposing what's happening to the outside world, but it's a mistake to think that these protests [in Iran] are because of social media. It's more conventional things like word-of-mouth and phone calls that really bring massive numbers of people into the streets" (Schectman 2009).

Additionally, one of the distinctive characteristics of social media, the relative anonymity of tweeters and bloggers, was actually detrimental to protesters' communication and mobilization. For example, a Twitter user claiming to be an Iranian student posted misinformation—including a report that demonstrations had been canceled—and listed a phone number of a supposed safe house for protesters that was a trap. As rumors spread that government

officials and secret police were using false Twitter feeds to spread information and trap insurgents, many citizens began to distrust Internet messages and to rely instead on more reliable sources (Kucera 2009).

Increased Iranian censorship and website shutdowns during this period reinforced the public perception that the Internet was an unreliable source of information and communication (Open Net Initiative 2009). In this context, only a limited amount of communication and mobilization among protestors actually occurred via social media. As their policies regulating speech and press have shown, the Iranian regime refuses to tolerate open communication channels within its borders and has been successful in limiting the flow of information through a centralized system. This is supposedly intended to prevent “Western media infiltration,” but is also designed to minimize communication between its own citizens (Djavadi 2009).

### Information-Sharing

With Iran’s strict control over domestic broadcasting and the ban on all foreign journalists after the election, social media functioned to facilitate citizen journalism within Iran and throughout the world via stories, photos, and videos.

Domestically, this mechanism was muted because of the widespread distrust of Internet sources and the strict government censorship and filtering software discussed above. Information online was intensely partisan and sometimes factually untrue, leaving Iranians to rely more on state-controlled media or word-of-mouth for details about the protests. For example, two false rumors that three million protestors were on the streets and that Mousavi was under house arrest spread quickly through Twitter, Facebook, and blogs without undergoing the fact- and source-checking that would have been by professional journalists (Kucera 2009).

Social media played its most prominent role in relaying information, though not always accurately, to a global audience. The Iranian government worked “on many fronts to shield the outside

world's view of the unrest, banning coverage of the demonstrations, arresting journalists, threatening bloggers, and trying to block Web sites like Facebook and Twitter." However, social media allowed news, images, and video to spread throughout the world (Heacock 2009).

As the Iranian government restricted professional journalists' access to events, the protesters were able to use Twitter's innovative communication system to direct the public and journalists to video, photographs, and written material related to the protests, even when the Twitter site itself was blocked domestically (Cohen 2009). User-generated content and reporting from Iranians on the ground allowed foreign news networks and bloggers to share information worldwide, although in many instances confirmation of the facts (when such was possible) was delayed. "We've been struck by the amount of video and eyewitness testimony...[Sometimes] up to five videos a minute from amateur sources," confirmed Jon Williams, BBC world news editor. "The days when regimes can control the flow of information are over" (BBC 2009).

U.S. officials said the Internet, specifically social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook, provided the United States with critical information in the face of an Iranian ban on Western journalists covering political rallies. Because the United States has no official relations with Iran and does not have an embassy in the country, it relied on information from media reports and the State Department's Iran Watch Offices located in embassies around the world. Although U.S. officials would not say whether they were communicating with Iranians directly, one noted that the United States learned that individuals had been identified and detained based on Twitter posts. "It is a very good example of where technology is helping," the official said (Labott 2009).

The situation in Iran is an example of the State Department's efforts to increase its use of technology in diplomacy, including social networking sites and Web video, to reach large numbers of people who would otherwise be difficult to reach (Pleming 2009). The Internet and the new media outlets gave international audiences an unprecedented look into the workings of both state violence and

massive unrest in Iran that could not be limited by traditional state forces of suppression.

## Public Forum

Social media also contributed to the protests by creating an online public forum through which protestors, citizens, and observers could discuss, share, collaborate, and air grievances and ideas that the government would traditionally repress. Iranians were also able to instantaneously and continuously communicate with Iranians living outside Iran as well as with foreign observers and supporters—social media facilitated relationships between Westerners and Iranians that are blocked on the formal international level. A physical manifestation of this was the spread of the election protests to cities around the world through the use of similar slogans and symbols (e.g., “Sea of Green” in reference to Mousavi’s supporters), and the letters of support issued by Iranians living in the West (Dabashi 2009).

A study by Mike Edwards, a social network researcher at The New School for Design, examined 79,000 tweets related to the Iran protests and found that one-third were repostings of other tweets (one-twentieth of all posts on Twitter, on average, are reposts) (Scola 2009). This suggests that many Twitter users in Iran did not use the network to communicate new information, but to express symbolic solidarity and unity in the form of “retweets.”

Individual photos and images, and stories of fraud, repression, and brutality, helped harness the emotional aspect of the protest and allowed citizens a public space to discuss topics and alternative political ideas prohibited under Iranian law. State power no longer has a stranglehold on information and association, at least not in the way it did before the emergence of new media and its creation of cyber-areas for political discussion (Djavadi 2009). These new technologies were used to bypass government censorship and geographical distance, and they created forums in which citizens and international observers could interact by sharing images, news, and ideas. Global opposition and transactional advocacy networks

emerged and created wider spheres of exchange, dialogue, and resistance. For example, protesters around the world set up proxy servers, making their own computers available to Iranians (Gross, 2009). Mobile phone footage of the shooting of Neda Soltani, a young Iranian woman killed during a protest, was posted on YouTube and other websites almost instantaneously and became a defining image of the Iranian crisis.

The Iranian uprising utilized the power of violent images disseminated throughout cyberspace. The distribution of images was a key strategy that attracted worldwide media coverage. The protests' success in that area showed that new media could create alternative public spheres in the face of government oppression. Within these virtual public spaces political activists acted as a unified force against the regime and promoted positive intervention and change (Lucas 2009). Unlike the more temporary mobilization and information-sharing uses of other social media, these public spaces and the strengthening of international networks are lasting results of the protests that have the ability to continue and grow with future instances of collective discontent.

### **Government Backlash**

ONI confirmed the expansion of targeted website blocking during the protests, which made access to reporting of events as well as political organizing far more difficult for Iranians. YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, the English and Persian versions of BBC, and websites of the major opposition candidates were all blocked. The government also blocked the blog host, blogfa.com, preventing many Iranian bloggers from updating their blogs. Although it stopped short of shutting down the Internet altogether, the government limited bandwidth and access speeds across the country. However, after years of Internet filtering, Iranian hackers and online activists had developed tools to circumvent government restrictions—an unintended consequence of government policies.

The government response to traditional and new media journalism was similar to their violent response to street protesters,

and continued through 2009. “At least a hundred journalists and cyber-dissidents have been arrested since the June 12th elections, and twenty-three of them are still being held” (Reporters Without Borders 2009). The Committee for the Protection of Journalists called Iran the “world’s leading jailer of journalists.” The government uses fear of violent action and criminal prosecution to intimidate journalists and further limit freedom of speech, and reports from Tehran indicated a government strategy of targeting citizen journalists during the protests (Committee to Protect Journalists 2009).

Among these three categories—information-sharing, creating a public space, and mobilizing protesters—social media has primarily been successful as a tool to share news and images with a global audience to gain the attention of the international media networks, and to create an open space for discussion and symbolic solidarity. It was not, however, a causal or practical mechanism that fueled or enabled the weeks-long protest. Government suppression, infiltration, and censorship limited the ability of protestors to use social media to mobilize, communicate, or share information with domestic audiences.

## EXPANDING FREEDOM OF SPEECH

There are many different ways to understand a “free” media environment: constitutional provisions protecting press freedom and freedom of information; enforcement of the provisions; an absence of laws restricting reporting; freedom of media outlets to determine content; free access to sources; a lack of official censorship and journalist self-censorship; freedom of media outlets from intimidation and violence; freedom from economic control by the government; freedom from economic manipulations and bribery; and a transparency of ownership which allows “consumers to judge the impartiality of the news” (Whitten-Woodring 2009, 598). Especially in the context of reporting the elections and protests, the traditional and new forms of media in Iran arguably fail to meet almost every one of these requirements. The Iranian regime has

systematically and purposefully limited, if not eliminated, the mainstream media's ability to act as a "watchdog" of government by denying it these freedoms.

The role social media played in creating a public space for discussion and solidarity, as well as distributing Iranian news and images internationally, calls into question some of the more stringent requirements for a media to be classified as "free." A narrower definition of media freedom is the "ability to perform a watchdog role, monitoring and criticizing government behavior, because when the media performs this function it is able to act as a forum for political debate regardless of other limitations on its freedom" (Whitten-Woodring 2009, 601). Using this narrower definition of the media, new and social media forms were able to expand freedom of expression to the point where they were able to fulfill the "watchdog" role traditionally held by traditional media outlets in countries without pervasive government control and censorship of the press. Although the Iranian regime limited the impact of social media, especially with regards to domestic mobilization, communication, and information-sharing through censorship, blocking, and infiltration, it stopped short of shutting down the internet entirely, allowing digital "holes" to open up in an otherwise closed society.

New media provided a public space for debate and disseminated news and images about the protests, which questioned the legitimacy that the regime hoped to claim in holding elections. Information regarding police brutality, beatings, and arrests was leaked to the world through vivid photos, stories, and videos, despite government attempts to repress its release through stringent press policies. Although new media cannot fill the role of a traditional free press and constitutional protection of free speech, the mechanisms of information sharing and creating a public space allow it to partially take on the "watchdog" role of exposing government abuses and the manipulation of the elections.

## EFFECT ON DEMOCRATIC NORMS AND RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Scholars and proponents of free speech have argued that freedom of speech is more important to democracy than the right to vote, relying on the belief that “if citizens have the right to complain, to petition, to organize, to protest, to demonstrate, to strike, to threaten to emigrate, to publish,” government will be more responsible and more responsive to its citizens (Mueller 1992, 984). According to this argument, the use of new and social media in expanding freedom of speech in Iran should have limited the Iranian regime’s human rights abuses.

However, during the months since Ahmadinejad’s election, Iran’s human rights situation has worsened, with mass arrests and detentions as well as brutal repression of demonstrations. According to Tehran’s prosecutor-general, Qorban-Ali Dorri Najafabadi, as of August 2009 more than 4,000 had been arrested in the capital alone. More than 240 prominent citizens were arrested by “unidentified agents and taken to undisclosed locations...[They are] held in incommunicado detention and have no access to legal counsel” (International Campaign for Human Rights 2009). These pervasive actions are explicit violations of the basic rights guaranteed by Iran’s legal codes and by the international treaties it has signed.

This repressive and abusive government response supports Jenifer Whitten-Woodring’s conception of the relationship between free expression and democracy: she argues that free press is a characteristic of democratic societies, and that in authoritarian states which lack democratic accountability, expansion of free speech actually begins a cycle of protest and government repression. Unlike in developed democracies, free speech under authoritarian regimes has a negative effect on the development of democratic norms and respect for human rights. In the case of Iran, which is by no classification a real electoral democracy, expansion of freedom of speech has brought with it increased arbitrary arrest and detention of journalists and dissidents, and distortion of the rule of law for protestors who have been incarcerated and criminally prosecuted.

Both on the streets and in the prisons, government repression has decreased respect for a fundamental human right to personal integrity. The right to the integrity of one's own person, defined as the "right to life and the inviolability of the human person... [protection from] prolonged and arbitrary detention, extrajudicial killing, torture, genocide, and other severe violations of bodily integrity," is considered indispensable to human dignity (Cingranelli 1999). The government response towards the protestors and dissidents has been swift and brutal, using systematic state violence to maintain political power and dissuade further uprisings.

A more complex question concerning social media's role is whether the international dissemination of news, images, and videos of government human rights violations has helped mitigate the violent aftermath of the protests—limiting what could have been a more severe crackdown on political agitators and protestors without the worldwide attention created by new media. Google chief executive Eric Schmidt said he hoped that the many clips of violent protest scenes posted on YouTube has helped to "moderate an over-reaction by the government." Schmidt refers to the theorized "YouTube effect" whereby "video clips, often produced by individuals acting on their own, are rapidly disseminated throughout the world thanks to video sharing websites... [Every] month, YouTube receives 20 million visitors who watch 100 million videos each day" (Naim 2007, 102)

In the "double-echo chamber"—where web-content which is re-aired by TV networks and is made permanent through web distribution by bloggers—these videos are expected to bring greater transparency and accountability to governments in traditionally closed and undemocratic societies. Building on the CNN effect of the 1990s, scholars hypothesize that wide international dissemination of these videos will help to determine foreign policy and humanitarian interventions by enhancing public knowledge of government atrocities. They expect the dissemination effect to be even greater than that of mainstream news networks: "International news operations may have thousands of professional journalists, but they will never be as omnipresent as millions of people carrying

phones that record video” (Naim 2007, 103).

Iranian government leaders, while outwardly blaming the foreign media and Western government officials for fueling the protests and meddling in their affairs, did feel the need to justify the election and protests to the world. The current regime claims its legitimate rule is derived from two forces: divine favor and popular support stemming from the revolutionary heritage of 1979. In this sense, maintaining at least a façade of democratic participation through popular elections is important to the its political power. In an attempt to re-establish legitimacy after the protests, Khamenei publicly announced an investigation regarding the accusations of voter fraud a few weeks after the election, and eventually declared Ahmadinejad the winner (BBC 2009). The digital movement has eroded the legitimacy created through the Iranian electoral process and limited what may have been even greater human rights violations against the protestors. Despite this, the government is still not being held accountable for violating the physical integrity of its citizens. Foreign governments and international organizations are widely abstaining from commenting on or involving themselves in Iran’s internal affairs. U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon sent a traditional congratulatory message to Ahmadinejad after his inauguration in August of 2009, despite a hunger strike in front of the United Nations’ New York headquarters led by dissident journalist Akbar Gangi calling for the release of political prisoners arrested in the election aftermath (Penketh 2009).

## PUTTING IT IN CONTEXT: A GREEN REVOLUTION?

In order to apply the lesson we’ve learned through the Iranian protests about the role new and social media can play in demonstrations against repressive regimes and within closed societies, we must evaluate whether or not the movement can actually be categorized as a “revolution.” Jack Goldstone defines a revolution as “an effort to transform the political institutions and the justifications for political authority in society, accompanied by formal or informal mass mobilization and non-institutionalized actions that

undermine authorities” (Goldstone 2001). International audiences and mass media outlets have characterized the protests surrounding the Iranian presidential election, and the demonstrations that have continued throughout the summer and fall of 2009, as signifying a fundamental, revolutionary shift in the Iranian political structure that has not been witnessed since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (Sullivan 2009). While it is true that the protests have harnessed much of the discontent and unrest within Iran, especially among younger activists and women who supported opponent candidate Mousavi, there has not been a widespread effort to supplant the regime that was put into power in the late 1970s by mass demonstrations and student movements. The protestors were mobilized by what they believed were the fraudulent results of an election that was undemocratic to begin with—the Islamic leaders vetted the potential candidates and determined who was allowed to run for the office in the first place. It has been suggested that even if Mousavi had been elected, no fundamental changes would have occurred in Iranian society or political sphere (Schectman 2009). Whether or not the continuing protests and growing civil resistance movement develop into a revolution with the larger goal of changing the structure of Iranian government cannot yet be determined. Since the June 2009 elections, protestors have used several national holidays as opportunities to express their continuing discontent with the regime, and media coverage has served to re-draw the world’s attention to the situation.

The role social media played in Iran’s “summer of discontent” signifies both the possibilities and limitations of digital resistance within traditionally closed societies. A true revolution may develop, similar to the “color revolutions” earlier this decade that emerged from contested elections in the former Soviet Union and Balkan states. However, for this to happen, the spirit of the protests and desire for fundamental political change would have to spread beyond Tehran’s activists to Iranian society as a whole, including the lower classes, rural inhabitants, and the older population. Until this occurs, the regime may still claim legitimacy through popular support and blame Western influences and media for the uprisings

against the government. The Internet and social media are limited in their ability to engage and mobilize these other sectors of society who are not technology-savvy enough to surpass pervasive government filtering and censorship, who distrust the information provided by new media forms, or who may not have access to the technology or tools necessary (Fairbanks 2009). The barriers of digitalized resistance help explain why participation in the demonstrations that have continued throughout the fall has remained limited to the original June protestors—young activists in Tehran. The continuing protests have been met with government repression both on the streets and online, and the regime has shown its ability to adapt its censorship techniques to new technological developments. Reporters Without Borders found that the government further limited access speed and increased webpage blocking days before the anticipated protests on November 4 and December 7 to prevent online organizing and mobilization.

Examination of the use of new media and online social networking has shown a remarkable ability, in the context of resistance movements, of protestors to harness the new technology available to provide almost instantaneous information and images to a global audience, as well as to create a global cyber-civic society in which individuals and organizations may discuss and collaborate around the movements (Dabashi 2009). The worldwide attention, networks of solidarity, and media coverage of the Iranian demonstrations have prompted the street protests to continue, despite limited gains and costly violent suppression and abuse. Without these tools, the dissidents would be protesting in a traditional closed society with no ability to communicate or share information with audiences abroad.

Using social media tools, Iranian protestors were able to greatly expand their freedom of speech and information-sharing abilities, but often at the cost of increased human rights abuses, arbitrary arrest, and torture. Beginning in August 2009, the government began to legally prosecute prominent protestors, journalists, and dissidents. The five death sentences handed down thus far serve as a constant reminder to potential protestors that the regime still

wields substantial power, and accusations of rape, torture, murder, and forced confessions re-emphasize the cruel acts through which the regime's authority is be manifested. However, the vast and continuing international media coverage of the so-called "Twitter Revolution" as well as the regime's response has also shown that the government will never be able to fully silence the Iranian electorate as long as digital protestors continue to tweet, upload pictures and videos, and blog for a global audience. Within this framework, the world—including foreign governments and international organizations—will continue watching Twitter feeds and You Tube videos as events in Iran unfold.

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