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- [Mobile Subscriber Growth in Africa](#)

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- [Tech Tools](#)
- [Theoretical Democracy Sources](#)
- [Internet and Democracy Sources](#)
- [Sources from "Madison and the Smart Mob"](#)

Twitter: Eye of the Beholder

August 11th, 2009 — Scott Hartley

Late last week *Foreign Policy*'s Evgeny Morozov authored a piece entitled "[Twitter: Think Again](#)" in which he highlights a series of Twitter statements such as "Authoritarian regimes should fear Twitter," "Twitter was the best source of news about the post-election protests in Iran," and "Twitter is a great organizing tool." While he certainly underscores salient deficiencies in micro-blogging, many of his points target the platform, rather than the provider. As explained by Harvard researcher Tim Hwang, innovator behind the [Web Ecology Project](#):

"I think Morozov's basic insight is right — there were gems of information popping up on Twitter throughout the #iranelection explosion, though it was quickly swamped out by noise, spam, and disinformation. However, this is only true if people take a naive view of Twitter as "just" the data stream. Simple methods like filtering the list of users with the highest number of RT's or @'s give a much higher signal-to-noise in using Twitter as an information source. So while this time

around and for most users Twitter may have been a fuzzy news source at best, this is a problem of platform design and available tools, rather than something inherent to the structure of Twitter or its users.”

While Twitter offers search, Facebook offers Lexicon to track wall-post trends, and Google offers Insights for Search, the value such services provide will increasingly become reliant on the ability to sift through, and determine what is truly important. Understanding trends may require deeper probing than is currently available through public interfaces, but such probing will likely invoke privacy concerns, impeding the facility of such analysis. This science of “Web Ecology” will become increasingly relevant. The Internet ecosystem is only growing in its complexity. Platforms that empower citizen journalists can also enable opportunistic marketers. Faster content syndication can help broaden access to information, but it also facilitates spam. Relevance is being conflated with noise, and dissection is intensive. As Google economist Hal Varian [stated last week](#):

“...The sexy job in the next 10 years will be statisticians. And I’m not kidding.”

And as Morozov concludes, the Twitter is in the eye of the beholder, and in the understanding of Web Ecology:

“Figuring out how to sift through all the noise and actually get hold of signal can be a challenging task... But ultimately it pays off. A carefully maintained Twitter feed can deliver you information that is far more diverse and interesting than it was in the pre-Twitter day.”



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Posted in [Citizen Journalism](#), [Iran](#). [2 Comments »](#)

2 Responses to “Twitter: Eye of the Beholder”

1. [Evgeny](#) Says:

[August 12th, 2009 at 4:56 pm](#)

Hi, Evgeny here. Can’t see where exactly we disagree. This is what I said near its end: ” Figuring out how to sift through all the noise and actually get hold of signal can be a challenging task, of course, requiring time and a fair amount of tinkering. But ultimately it pays off. A carefully maintained Twitter feed can deliver you information that is far more diverse and interesting than it was in the pre-Twitter day”.

2. [Tim](#) Says:

[August 14th, 2009 at 1:32 am](#)

Hi, Tim here.

@Evgeny, quite right — think we’re absolutely in agreement on this one. This is my bad: was only shown a part of your FP article to comment on, for your answer to “Twitter was the best source of news about the post-election protests in Iran.” Sorry for the confusion!

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- [October 2009](#)
- [September 2009](#)
- [August 2009](#)
- [July 2009](#)
- [June 2009](#)
- [May 2009](#)
- [April 2009](#)
- [March 2009](#)
- [February 2009](#)
- [January 2009](#)
- [December 2008](#)
- [November 2008](#)
- [October 2008](#)
- [September 2008](#)
- [August 2008](#)
- [July 2008](#)
- [June 2008](#)
- [May 2008](#)
- [April 2008](#)
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