

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Abstract Approved: _____

Eric Hill

The post-election violence in the aftermath of Iran's 2009 presidential election was viewed through the lens of new, social media. New media publishers created and supported a movement, and in the process they wove a national struggle into the global media landscape. This exploration places Twitter in the context of other historically oppositional narratives, notably pamphleteering during the American Revolution, *samizdat* publishing in the Soviet Union, and Iran's 1979 Revolution, when cassette tapes played the role Twitter would take on thirty years later. It explores the role new media plays in convergence culture and explains the workings, effectiveness, and downsides of relying on those mediums to spread dissident messages.

Key Words: Iran, Social Media, Twitter, Revolution, Oppositional Narrative, Pamphlet, *Samizdat*, Anonymity

Corresponding email address: millerinlee@gmail.com

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One Person, One Broadcaster

Social Media and Iran

by

Erin L. Miller

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APPROVED:

Eric Hill, Mentor, representing University Honors College

Steve Kunert, Committee Member, representing English

Bill Loges, Committee Member, representing New Media Communications

Anita Helle, Transitional Director, School of Writing, Literature and Film

Dan Arp, Dean, University Honors College

I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, University Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

Erin L. Miller, Author

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One Person, One Broadcaster: Social Media and Iran

Context

On June 12, 2009, Iran held a presidential election that was already slated to be polarizing. From a pool of around a dozen candidates, one man emerged as incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's main threat: Mir Hossein Mousavi. Formerly Iran's Prime Minister, he campaigned on a reformist platform that presented an expanded view of women's rights, more economic representation for the middle class, and a promise to end the political cat-and-mouse game between Iran and the US. His views on nuclear weapons were quite similar to Ahmadinejad's - both men believed strongly that Iran had the right to build a nuclear defense system. An architect and painter, a man who lauded his wife's college education publicly consulted her, and a critic of Ahmadinejad's fundamentalist ruling style, Mousavi was seen by the international community as a hopeful representation of the true values of the Iranian people. The election was expected to be close.

On Saturday, June 13th, poll numbers started filtering out of Iran's state-run media. Ahmadinejad was winning by almost thirty percent. Nearly one hundred percent of the eligible population had cast ballots in more than 170 cities. The statistics, normally the makings of a democratic dream,

pointed to deep fraud. In fifty cities, the vote count was higher than the population count. Ahmadinejad was winning in provinces dominated by urbanites that were known to oppose him quite forcefully. Protests began just hours after the first poll results were published

The protests sprang up in cities all over the country, but Tehran, the capitol, was the focal point. From that day until July 30, protesters massed in streets, on rooftops, at mosques, in cemeteries, and in front of government buildings. They chanted, “Death to the Dictator!” and “Alaho Akbar!” They wore green armbands to show their commitment to Mousavi’s candidacy and to reaffirm their faith in Islam. The protests reached their climax on July 17, when nearly two million people marched in the streets of Tehran. They gathered at a Friday Prayer Service and were greeted by a defiant and vocal Mousavi. Prayers were led by noted reformer Hashemi Rafsanjani. While there were no protests after July 17 to match this one in size, the organized opposition continued through August, when the trials of opposition leaders began.

The Workings and Effectiveness of Twitter

The organization of Twitter as a tool and business resource shaped the way Iranian dissidents spread their oppositional message. Three elements of Twitter were vital: the hashtag categorizing system, retweeting, and Twitter's decision to delay scheduled maintenance during the post-election violence. There were doubts about Twitter's viability in a revolutionary situation and worries that Western media, eager for a new angle, was exaggerating its use.

Twitter's wiki site defines *hashtag* as "community-driven convention for adding additional context and metadata to your tweets" (Rockwell 1). They're non-hierarchical, which is one of the reasons they have become such a compelling way to compile information. In Iran, Mousavi1388's tweets that ended in #IranElection were grouped with those of college students like OxfordGirl and foreign media like AndersonCooper. The effect was a staggering amount of information; a quick search for #IranElection on December 3, 2009, months after the election, yielded more than 60 tweets in a three-minute period. This "user-generated content isn't just the output of ordinary people with access to creative tools. It requires access to re-creative tools as well" (Shirky 83), and hashtagging provides Twitter users with an immediate means of republishing important data.

Twitter uses a technique known as a resonance algorithm to monitor the velocity and decay of tweets through the Twitter network and to provide

real-time information to advertisers and individuals on the popularity of their posts. The hierarchy of information is created by the participants, who in turn shape the resonance algorithm.

Retweeting may seem somewhat redundant in comparison to hashtagging. A retweet is a copy of someone else's tweet, but it's more than just duplication. In the case of Iran's post-election violence, the two tools were used together. They intensified the amplification, reinforced the non-hierarchical structure of the information, and served as a practical organizing tool. Members of the global community could easily become participants in very local events. Anyone could become a redistributor through which retweets were relayed. Although "most user-generated content is created as communication in small groups" (Shirky 87), here individuals could begin to think of themselves both as part of the audience and as the broadcaster.

An important milestone in seeing Twitter as a revolutionary communication tool for the Iranian opposition came on June 15, 2009, when an entry entitled "Down Time Rescheduled" popped up on Twitter's official blog. It explained that Twitter's staff and network partners "recognize the role Twitter is currently playing as an important communication tool in Iran. Tonight's planned maintenance has been rescheduled to tomorrow between 2-3p PST (1:30a in Iran)." It was a delay that had been called for by the tweeters themselves, including Mousavi.

Clash of Old and New Media

The post-election violence in Iran did not signal a revolution for that country. Ahmadinejad remained in power and soon news of the conflict was only sporadically front page news. But the use of new media, especially Twitter, signaled a revolution in the way an oppositional community spreads messages and combines old media with new. More than a month and a half of organized and well-publicized protests brought together students, middle-aged workers, reformers, and the international community. The state-controlled old media continued to broadcast reports about peaceful streets and a successful, legitimate election, but the self-publishing people of Iran were using new media to get their message around government censorship and into the hands of fellow dissidents and the international news community. Twitter became their most visible tool.

Mousavi was relying on Twitter and using it to rally supporters when it became unsafe for him to appear in public. At one point Mousavi's account seemed to recognize the oppositional power of Twitter, tweeting "*We have no national press coverage in Iran, everyone should help spread Mousavi's message. One Person = One Broadcaster. #IranElection.*"

Samizdat

Mousavi's plea for each person to become a broadcaster has at its roots a longstanding international tradition of turning to the masses when governments fail.

Oppositional texts like the Iranian tweets have an antecedent in the *samizdat* publishing network of the Soviet Union. These texts sought to change perspective as well as promote involvement with the cause, and were a physical forbearer of tweets. The *samizdat* network of Russian revolutionaries became professionals at “circulating uncensored material privately” (Saunders 7). These pamphlets and short essays appeared “in hundreds of copies, either retyped, Xeroxed or copied by hand. Single copies, often inexact, filtered abroad. Translations of them appeared in several languages” (Saunders 8). The resemblance to Twitter is uncanny: People can choose to retweet another person's idea, attach a keyword to link the concept to a broader idea, and translate tweets into multiple languages. In a process similar to retweeting, *samizdat* authors would start their work “snowballing” through a network of *samizdat* groups working covertly in churches, schools, and lower government offices (Hyung-Min Joo 572). If the piece was deemed good enough, it would be recopied and spread through another individual's network.

The word *samizdat* is an amalgamation of *sam* (self) and *izdat* (publisher or publishing house). The state media was run by the *Gosizdat*

(State Publishing House), which had control over all legally published texts. As government censors rejected the works of dissidents, the authors were banned from the Union of Writers. Legal publishing was no longer an option for these men and women, so they turned to a new technology: carbon copy machines. With access to a carbon copy machine, an individual became writer, publisher, and distributor.

In Iran, the combined audience/publisher, or narratee/narrator platform of Twitter, was used to disseminate information about protest locations, police brutality, international support, and event timelines to an audience of Iranians and to the larger world. A tweet by an unknown Iranian could end up as a retweet by CNN or MSNBC. As in Soviet Russia, the pipeline of information into America and the rest of the world relied upon anonymous and non-journalist sources for reliable information – “the message is clear: If the bureaucrats won’t print it, we’ll get around it ourselves” (Saunders 8).

This method of individual evaluation and republishing could be measured geographically in Soviet Russia. If your piece made it from your location of exile in Poland or Hungary all the way to a peer in Moscow, you could consider yourself successful. During the post-election protests in Iran, Twitter’s resonance algorithm allowed users to track the spread of their ideas across a digital landscape.

Samizdat's appearance in a society represented a reclaiming of speech by private citizens. The public, rather than a bureaucracy, took control of what was and wasn't published. Rather than seeking state approval or international sanctions, *samizdat* texts sought to turn a reader inward to the self as an agent of change. It took the place of the silenced voice of representative government, reclaiming society's right to "see, hear, think and judge on its own terms" (Hyung-Min Joo 576).

The demographics of the *samizdat* movement and Iran's Twitter population are quite similar. The *samizdat* writers were regarded as "politically immature," "young," and doers of "great damage to society" (Johnston 123). Similar language was used by Tehran to deny the protesters their legitimacy. The *samizdat* writers were accused of being spies for the West, as were the Iranian protestors (Johnston 123). Both existed in a legal gray area. While the words of the writers certainly went against the State, and while many of them had faced legal sanctions and imprisonment before, there was little in the actual laws of the country to outlaw *samizdat*. To shut down the self-publishers, the Soviet government used the same techniques as Tehran: a campaign of consistent harassment, threats, house arrest, and imprisonment.

Twitter and *samizdat* are accused of the same paradoxical transgression. Some say they are both instruments of the elite, tools of an intelligentsia that tends to be naturally younger and more liberal than the

average population. Both are also accused of the opposite: of being too commercial, too public when it comes to matters of politics, and generally unsophisticated. Just as some contemporary commentators mourn the egotistical ramblings of Twitter celebrities, so did the Soviet critics of *samizdat*, who saw it as a conduit for poorly written poetry, failed screenplays, and the rants of aging communists.

Samizdat made its way West in the pockets and suitcases of traveling businesspeople and academics. It was published outside of Soviet Russia mostly in specialist journals, immigrant newsletters, and political literature (Johnston 131). In sympathetic communities abroad, *samizdat* was given far more weight than news from any other source. It was considered “reliable and accurate” and often prompted its reader to look at government publications “more critically” (Johnston 132) not necessarily because that was an explicit instruction within the *samizdat* texts, but because knowledge bred curiosity.

Thomas Paine and Revolutionary Discourse

In 1776, just after the American Revolution began, an Englishman who had arrived in Philadelphia weakened by typhus and embittered by debts published a short pamphlet. In it, he argued for total and complete separation of the colonies from Britain, and he did so with a rhetorical style that appealed to most everyone who got a copy. *Common Sense* was read aloud in bars, shared at churches, and copied into letters that were sent across New England. Thomas Paine wrote anonymously, and many speculated that the popular pamphlet was the work of John Adams, who called the writing style “manly and striking,” or Benjamin Franklin. The anonymous nature of the text meant that it garnered authority not “from the reputation of its author” or even from “a man of exceptional powers or qualities” (Hogan and Williams 2). The writing was accessible, stirring, and rational.

There are many differences to be found between a 77-page pamphlet from the 18th century and hundreds of 140-character digital snippets sent flying through the internet in 2009, but there are also wonderful and noteworthy similarities. Anonymity is certainly one, and although John Adams eventually tracked down Paine and revealed his identity, the unveiling came well after the power of the text had been established. There was also a newness to the pamphleteering style that is reflected in social media today. The pamphleteers were “passionate,” “self-revelatory,” imbued

not with political titles but with the “universal sentiment of all the people” (Hogan and Williams 3). In July of 2009, tweets connected to the #IranRevolution hashtag alternated between passionate, self-revelatory, and simply practical. Many were pleas for a Western audience to pay attention, but many, as in *Common Sense*, admonished the reader to get involved with the protest movement. There was, in both discourses, an appeal to two groups simultaneously: those who were ready to take action but required instruction and inspiration, and those who were only recently made aware of the conflict and were in need of more information.

Paine praised the conversations that sprang up around *Common Sense* as “collective deliberation,” which he viewed as an integral part of the “emerging egalitarian *ethos* of revolutionary America” (Hogan and Williams 9). The phrase “common sense” meant more to Paine than the average reader. Trained in rhetoric and logic, Paine thought of common sense as a “collective rhetorical process” that could move society towards a “universal sensibility” (Hogan and Williams 9). He believed that the process of deliberation led to collective wisdom.

In contemporary American society, “collective wisdom” and “internet” are often connected in ironic rather than revelatory terms. If the internet is a democracy, Justin Bieber, star of three of the four most viewed videos of all time on Youtube, is President and Lady Gaga is his Secretary of State. This is not a picture of a society positively transformed by the oppositional tools

available online. Social justice work makes up a tiny percentage of internet traffic, and it remains nearly impossible to gauge how an individual's internet proclivities translate into the physical world.

But the seemingly infinite tide of hedonistic internet traffic is countered by a force the pamphleteers would recognize. Paine, unlike the internet stars of today, relished his anonymity. With it, he became the most well-read and popular unknown in the history of the colonies, and his “personal standing appeared inconsequential to the reception of his work” (Hogan and Williams 13). This is where the Iranian bloggers and Twitter users begin to break free of the normal rules of internet fame. They lacked music videos, traceable identities, and big-name producers, but they got the attention of mainstream media, and they held it for weeks. Just as “the impact of *Common Sense* had less to do with the text itself than with its context and timing” (Hogan and Williams, 15), the Iranian protesters utilized the right medium at the right time, anonymously, to draw attention to their cause. They effectively targeted the same two groups that Paine succeeded in drawing into a revolution, and they did it as he did, without name recognition.

Khomeini's Cassettes

In 1971, the Iranian monarchy celebrated 2,500 years of continuous rule flowing back to the beginnings of the Persian Empire. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Shah of Iran at the time of the celebration, was on a mission of modernization. He was secular, acknowledged Israel, attempted to enfranchise women, and had appointed government officials from outside the ranks of Islamic scholars. Many in Iran were against his program of Westernization, seeing it as an affront to Islam and a sign of corruption stemming from the Shah's perceived links to the United States and Israel. Ruhollah Khomeini was in exile at the time of the celebration, missing the 160 acres of golden tents, the Lanvin-designed uniforms of the palace guards, and the menu of quail's eggs and champagne sorbet. He was next door, in Najaf, Iraq, having just completed a lecture series called *Islamic Government: Authority of the Jurist*.

His lectures focused on the need for *sharia* law in the fallen, Westernized Iran. Further, he believed that the government should be formed solely of Islamic scholars with a deep understanding of *sharia*. This clerical rule would drive out the Western influence and prevent the injustice, corruption, and oppression Khomeini saw as rampant in the Shah's government. During his fourteen years of exile, Khomeini built a broad base of allies who were also opposed to the Shah's Westernization of Iran. These allies included secular scholars and Islamic reformists. They were united in

their opposition to the Shah, but they made an uncomfortable dissident group due to the stark differences in their political ideologies.

The Najaf lectures were recorded and distributed as cassette tapes. The first copies entered Iran in 1970, and for the next eight years they spread through marketplaces, competing on shelves next to recordings of other exiled leaders. In this capitalist battle for the ears of Iranians, Khomeini was far ahead of his contemporaries (Sreberny and Mohammadi 179). By 1979, the year the Shah was replaced by Khomeini, an estimated 100,000 copies of his lectures were circulating on cassettes. The recordings were done in public with a large audience, and the *salavat*, “lamentations and prayers,” of the listeners are audible in the background (Sreberny and Mohammadi 121). Much like Paine’s *Common Sense* and the works of *samizdat* writers, Khomeini’s lectures prompted public debate despite their somewhat underground status. The tapes were distributed by mosques and street vendors, and included a call to action similar to those made by his Soviet and American counterparts. He called on the “brave Iranian people” to continue their “struggle against the brutal regime” of the Shah (Sreberny and Mohammadi 148).

After the fall of the Shah and the appointment of Khomeini as Grand Ayatollah and Supreme Leader, Iranian supporters of the Shah’s modernizations adopted the cassette technique, this time spreading messages

about news, political philosophy, and secular poetry (Sreberny and Mohammadi 121).

The use of Twitter in Iran represented a layering of history, a modern translation of Khomeini's cassettes. Similar to anonymous Twitter users, Khomeini had to rely on international phone lines to record his messages in order to avoid detection. When followers in Iran received his messages, they spent painstaking hours splicing and recording on numerous cassette players. In 1977, at the height of Khomeini's popularity as a recording artist, sales of musical tapes fell as "religiously and politically oriented materials" came to dominate the market (Sreberny and Mohammadi 121). Thirty years later it would be Khomeini's successor, Ali Khamenei, calling violence down on the streets of Tehran in the midst of a new wave of dissident publishers.

Downsides and Criticism

As important as Twitter appeared in the days following the election, many in the American media questioned the validity of tweeting as a tool for social justice. More often, they questioned the quantitative use of Twitter in Iran.

The pushback began immediately. Four days after the election and near the height of the violent protests, *Wired's* Nicholas Thompson warned readers that they shouldn't get carried away. In blunt language, he pointed out that "many of the Iranian tweeters described in the Western press seem to have between 10,000 and 30,000 followers. That's a lot; but Ashton Kutcher it ain't" (Thompson 1). A UCSD professor based in Tehran expressed fears about mainstream media coverage of Twitter as opposition toolkit: "The Twitter factor is present, but not as significant as, say, cell phone or social networking sites. I just wonder how the US media is projecting its own image of Iran into what is going on here on the ground" (Thompson 1).

Caroline McCarthy at CNET news provided another view of the downside of viewing Twitter as the medium of the protesters, noting that "in a major international crisis, one of the prime channels of communication and news for individuals, media outlets, and governments alike is a two-year-old start-up in San Francisco with 50 employees, no discernible business model, a history of technical instability, and a misinformation-related lawsuit on the table. This is a problem" (McCarthy 1). The lack of establishment credentials

and stability was seen as cause for alarm, even from bloggers and new media junkies who were part of the wave of Web 2.0.

The problems with Twitter extended far beyond the workings of the company itself. Iranian Twitter users numbered about 20,000 in 2009, making up about 0.03% of the country's population (Morozov 12). Breaking down that number reveals even more problems. Twitter is used primarily by the young and the well-off, those Iranians with enough disposable income and leisure time to purchase and learn to navigate the smart devices required to post to Twitter. Beyond simply learning the technology, the Iranian literati had to be comfortable bypassing censors with tools like private servers, satellite links, and connections to tech-savvy foreigners. These were people with resources, access, and digital nativity. This limited window into the Iranian population makes an outsider's view of the change agents inevitable: the young, wired people of Iran must be instrumental organizers. The truth, though, is that Twitter was not so relevant to the tens of thousands of people marching in the streets of Tehran. The "pro-Western, technology-friendly, iPod-carrying young people" made up a tiny percentage of the protesters. The connection between a few thousand Twitter postings and a street march of millions can seem purely imaginary (Morozov 12).

Mainstream media outlets, forced out of Tehran by the regime and lacking connections on the ground, turned to Twitter in some cases because there was no other open channel of information. They brought in young, often

amateur journalists from the blogging ranks to translate this new information language. In their rush to report on the new media landscape, many journalists lost sight of the real story of fraud, oppression, and opposition. The imaginary link was made most often by Western bloggers, particularly Andrew Sullivan of the *Atlantic* and Nico Pitney of the *Huffington Post*. Both writers were published almost entirely online, inhabiting a professional space somewhere between news anchor and armchair explorer.

Rather than foreign correspondents collecting stories from the field, Sullivan and Pitney were playing a complex, international game of "Telephone" (Morozov 11). As messages were relayed from Farsi to Persian to English, passing through multiple translators and multiple Twitter accounts, through American blogs and onto more established mainstream media websites, the messages were surely diluted, tampered with, or otherwise changed. For the most part, this didn't seem to bother the bloggers. There was a feeling of newness and excitement around the technology that made fact-checking a second or third priority.

Twitter, it turned out, was almost as dangerous an environment as the real-life streets of Tehran in the days following the election. While many of the tweeters and bloggers were part of the diaspora, those who remained in the country were leaving a digital trail of their actions, sentiments, and connections. Twitter and Facebook gave the Iranian intelligence service

“superb platforms for gathering open source intelligence about future revolutionaries” (Morozov 12) and their networks. The ramifications of that data mining may not be known for several years.

Often, American allies added to the danger. Some began posting hacking instructions on Twitter, attempting to arm the Iranian tweeters with the technological munitions they needed to take down government censorship. Their tutorials resulted in a slowdown across the entire Iranian grid, meaning both protesters and government officials couldn’t access the web for several hours. The Americans essentially “did what the Iranian government couldn’t: make the internet unusable for activists” (Morozov 13).

There is an important distinction to make between those activists on the ground in Iran and all other parties involved in the social media protests. Some have suggested that those who tweeted, blogged, and posted images from the safety of their homes an ocean away from the protests should be called “slacktivists.” Retweeting a revolution is, to some, the same as flicking off a light switch to save the planet: an infinitesimal drop in an ocean of social injustices, and nothing more. These critics have a point. Twitter didn’t bring Mousavi to power, and neither did the protesters in the streets.

Yet even that oft-imaginary link between the digital and physical worlds can change the way a society views itself and its government. Thomas Paine and his contemporaries, in possession of the means and will to publish revolutionary pamphlets, were in an intellectual minority. The *samizdat*

writers represented the few men and women willing to go against the Union of Writers, risking their lives and the safety of their families to progress human rights. Those few Iranians on Twitter took daily risks to spread a message. They were a tiny piece of the population, but they were part of a historical vanguard with an impressive pedigree. The catalyst, if strong enough, doesn't need to be massive.

Anonymity

“Communipaw,” “Magawisca,” and “Zillah” could all be Twitter handles from the present day. They are actually pseudonyms used by female abolitionists in the 18th century. All three anonymous women acted as whistleblowers within the abolitionist movement, arguing that a more prominent role for women would mean a stronger argument for equality between the races. Thomas Paine signed *Common Sense* with the moniker “An Englishman,” Samuel Adams was occasionally “Candidus,” and even the writers of the federalist papers chose to sign that document with “Publius” (Wallace 2). It is important to note that the alternate names these men and women chose are not simply second recognizable identities, like Helen Lane or John Thompson, but purposeful monikers that add to the power of their texts. This tradition of the meaningful pseudonym can be a detriment to acknowledging the legitimacy of Twitter’s anonymous users. It is easier to attach authority to “Publius,” an important name dripping with the power and reverence of Latin, than to an identifier such as “libra0071.”

The false distinction between profound and mundane names has to be acknowledged in order to grasp why the anonymity of Twitter was so important, and why the sometimes-silly names add to the public media landscape. In many ways, names such as “Candidus” and “Communipaw” exist behind an intellectual wall. Those anonymous publishers of the past were people with the means, time, and desire to publish physical, tangible

documents. They had money and access to materials and education that wasn't available to the average activist. Twitter has this element as well, specifically those users who tweeted from private servers inside Iran.

However, the instantaneous, free, global network of Twitter stretches the revolutionary potential past that of historical anonymous works of dissent. It takes just a few seconds to retweet an idea, it is completely free to access the technology from a public computer, and it is extremely safe to do so from outside Iran. Risks are low, amplification is high. Anonymity in the age of the internet comes much more easily to the masses than it did in the age of the printing press.

Those benefits of low entry cost and high audience numbers are often used to argue for internet speech regulation. Revolutionary messages on the web are "more dangerous than the same speech in print because they reach larger audiences more easily" (Wallace 4). With no gatekeeper and fuzzy legal authority over speech that easily spread beyond national boundaries, marginal ideas could slip out into the "marketplace of ideas" (Wallace 5) and incite an otherwise placid population into action. The Supreme Court of the United States has upheld that "the identity of the speaker is no different from other components of the document's content that the author is free to include or exclude" (Wallace 3). Iran had no such statute, making the strength of web anonymity even more important, and the global effort to shield Iranian tweeters from the government in Tehran even more vital.

There was a tragedy in the days following the election that mixed anonymity and intimacy, holding the attention of the world in a way that previous post-election events had not been able to achieve. Neda Agha-Soltan, a young woman who had not even cast a vote in the proceeding election, was drawn to a large street protest on June 20th. Neda was one of eighteen people killed that day, hours after Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had announced that unless the protests ended immediately, the protesters themselves would be responsible for the violence that followed (Petrou 2). Her murder, captured on a cell phone video recorder, received the gruesome distinction of the most widely watched death in history. The unedited video shows her on the street, a doctor crouched over her. She is whispering “I’m burning, I’m burning” as the camera’s owner captures her final moments. Neda means “voice” in Persian, appropriate both because Neda was a musician and because her voice became the intimate, public symbol of what it meant to be a young person in Iran that summer (Baird 2). She was instantly a martyr.

The events around Neda’s death highlighted the need for both anonymity and intimacy. Her fiancé was arrested and held for 65 days in the notorious Nevin Prison. When he was released, he paid to be smuggled out of the country and now lives in Canada as a political refugee with a new identity. Her music teacher took the opposite path. “They know me, they know where I am. They can come and get me whenever they want,” he

announced, knowing that his presence in the infamous video meant he represented a threat to Ahmadinejad's regime. He was right. Arrested and tortured, he was brought back to the scene of Neda's death and made to claim that there were no government soldiers nearby at the time of Neda's death (Petrou 3). The other visible figure in the video, Dr. Arash Hejazi, made his escape in time. He spoke about Neda's death from the safety of the UK, where he remains in exile, itself a kind of anonymous citizenship.

Stories and video of Neda's public death rocketed through the dissident community. The video became a focal point around which the anonymous Twitter users structured their pleas to the international media community. It was used, it seemed, as evidence to legitimize and humanize the protesters. A few months after the protests, with the video of Neda still garnering millions of views, the BBC conducted a survey on internet values. Twenty-eight thousand people participated, and 87% believed that internet access was a fundamental right, representing a "serious and profound shift in our understanding" of how people think about and use the web. The survey went deeper, finding that respondents viewed internet access as "crucial to democracy, diplomacy, and open government" (Baird 1). There was no causal link explored between the events of June and July 2009 and the startling shift in views, but the correlation appears strong. Neda was, tragically, the intimate face of a movement that required a kind of mass anonymity that only the internet could provide. In 2009, a George Polk Award was given to

the unnamed person or people who captured Neda's death on video. It was the first time in the organization's sixty-year history that the journalism prize was awarded to an anonymous contributor.

Oppositional Narrative and Legitimacy

The goals of the Iranian protesters were revolutionary, but those goals were not the ones that were to be realized in 2009. Rather, the protesters became the face of how oppositional narratives and social media could form a community that spanned the globe. This is entirely unfair in some senses – American college students retweeting from their dorm rooms were not in danger of being shot or harassed or imprisoned. That digital connection did have real meaning, though, particularly when it came to recognizing the protesters and their goals as legitimate. While “revolution ... is a mode of resistance to forms of power it regards as illegitimate, oppositional behavior has a particular potential to change the state of affairs by changing people’s mentalities” (Chambers 1), in this case the mentalities of Americans as well as Iranians.

Chambers’ point furthers the argument that while Iran’s protesters did not make a political revolution, they made a media revolution. The international exposure and news coverage were an example of an oppositional practice that helped “maintain some sense of dignity and personhood” (Chambers 7). The protesters were viewed in many respects as more legitimate and representative of the Iranian people than the Ahmadinejad government, which was already scorned in the West. “In the modern social formation, power is diffuse – not localized, but available in different situations and in different degrees to different people” (Chambers

xiv), and during the post-election violence in Iran, protesters took to the streets, the roofs, and the Internet to exercise and organize their dissent.

Convergence Culture

The conflict and combination of old and new media is the heart of convergence culture. Old media is defined for these purposes as traditional newspaper, cable and network news, and radio broadcasters. New media can be tied in some ways to “alternative,” in opposition to traditional, because much of it relies on old ways of communicating tied up in a new package. No matter how many media outlets spring up, “the permanent question is how society will be informed of the news of the day” (Shirky 60).

In America in the 1960’s, the passivity of television was mocked in the Gil Heron song, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*. The lyrics were made up of advertising slogans, political campaign mottos, and quotes from pop culture icons. The dissatisfaction with commercial mainstream media heightened the desire for consumer-controlled information. It was in that decade that comic books with political metaphors, folk music, people’s radio, and alternative newspapers began competing with the major networks in a big way for the first time. America in the 1960s experienced an alternative media boom that was echoed, in a quieter way, fifty years later in the streets of Tehran. For both societies, “the counterculture communicated primarily through grassroots media. The networks and newspapers filtered out messages they didn’t want us to hear, and the exclusionary practices of these intermediaries fostered the demand for grassroots and participatory media channels” (Jenkins 221). Iran’s government run media amplifies this

American example, turning “exclusionary practices” into hard line censorship.

Participants in new media such as Twitter, Facebook, and other components of Web 2.0 are primarily concerned with creating a “participatory, democratic online community” (Jenkins 275). Self-publishing sites combine three roles, “production, selection, and distribution” (Jenkins 275), into a single amateur role. “Professional self-conception and self-defense, so valuable in ordinary times, become a disadvantage in revolutionary ones” (Shirky 69), as journalists become concerned with the threats to their profession while bloggers and tweeters are less focused on the media and more focused on the news. The threat of new media, specifically from amateur unpaid blogger-turned-journalists, was long ignored by traditional media. The “journalistic privilege” to be a “truth-teller” was confined to a professional group with unions, specialized college degrees, and even protection from the law (Shirky 71). But what was once “the primary distinction” between professional and amateur journalists is gone. What was once a chasm has now become “a mere slope” (Shirky 77).

In the context of Twitter, the conflict between the mainstream and the traditional, the professional and the amateur, becomes almost irrelevant. Oftentimes, the mainstream media missed the conflict altogether and “failed to understand that the effortlessness of publishing means that there are many more outlets. The same idea, published in dozens or hundreds of places,

can have an amplifying effect that outweighs the verdict from the smaller number of professional outlets” (Shirky 65). Iran’s state-run, traditional, professional news outlet was drowned out by the chorus of tweets from just a few hundred normal people.

“The Big One”

Clay Shirky began an interview with the TED blog by saying: “This is the first revolution that has been catapulted onto a global stage and transformed by social media” (TED 1). He calls it “the big one” and puts Twitter in the center of the new media revolution he sees brewing in Iran. Since Twitter is “easier to integrate and harder to control” than older social media such as Facebook and Google, Iran’s government censors were having a hard time figuring out how to shut it down. Normal people could sit at a computer screen and watch the news in real time. They could retweet, add hashtags, and follow Iranians and news organizations with just as much ease as following their older brother, favorite celebrity or childhood friend.

Twitter provided an intimate means of interaction in a digital world that could at times seem too anonymous. Reading personal messages from individuals on the ground prompted a new sense of involvement. People “desperate to do something to show solidarity like wear green” could suddenly “offer secure web proxies, or persuade Twitter to delay an engineering upgrade. We [could] help keep the medium open” (TED 1).

Conclusion

While the concept of authorship can seem to remain crucial to novel covers and newspaper bylines, there have long been alternatives to professionally mediated publication. “We are witnessing a clash of cataclysmic proportions between two great technologies,” wrote Marshall McLuhan in 1967, more than forty years before the first combinations of “internet” and “revolution” entered the political sphere. He also admonished a tamed population to become “both author and publisher” using the same technology as the *samizdat* writers, the Xerox machine. Thomas Paine called for both common sense and anonymous patriotism in the face of nonsensical oppression a full two centuries before the first Twitter revolutions were named, scoffed at, and studied.

When the medium is flawed, though, how much does the message change? Does it matter that Twitter is for-profit, that it has fewer employees than a grocery store, that it was born on American soil? If the revolution doesn’t happen, is the medium the obvious martyr? The political landscape indicates that Twitter has changed the way dissent works in a wired age. When an Iranian chooses to tweet in English, that individual chooses to broadcast a message outside his or her own country and language group. When Americans retweet the location of a Tehranian protest, they aren’t inviting their neighbors in sunny Los Angeles to hop on a plane to Iran. They’re consciously amplifying a dissenting view.

For a few weeks in July of 2009, Twitter's resonance algorithm kicked tweets from and about Iran to the top of results pages, which in turn created a ripple that moved from amateur bloggers to mainstream journalists until old and new media were relying on indistinguishable, anonymous sources. The protests didn't topple Ahmadinejad from power, but they did force the West to pay attention to the differences between an oppressive regime and the citizens of Iran. They helped form an international language for Iranian dissidents and members of the diaspora and strengthened connections between members of the young, educated, democracy-seeking generation of Iranian activists.

This was active participation from a global community. It was a revolutionary use of new media to further the goals of a dissident group. It was a convergence of old and new media where participants told their narratives, and retold them, in oppositional ways. The hashtag #IranElection is not used much anymore, and Iranian protests only occasionally pop up as stories on the front pages of major American newspapers. But for a time, there was a frenzy of activity around a digital framework. New media publishers created and supported a movement, and in the process they wove a national struggle into the global media landscape.

Tweets from the days following Iran's Presidential Election 2009

Mousavi has called emergency press conference to dispute IRNA claims of Ahmadinejad victory. 11 p.m.: Africa Street/Taheri; No. 76, Suite #1 2:50 p.m. June 12 (TehranBureau)

ALL internet & mobile networks are cut. We ask everyone in Tehran to go onto their rooftops and shout ALAHO AKBAR in protest #IranElection 2:44 p.m. June 13 (mousavil388)

Students & people fighting back a large group of police & Basij right now at university of physics! I'm going to join them. #iranelection 11:34 a.m. June 14 (Change_for_Iran)

@twitter Twitter is currently our ONLY way to communicate overnight news in Iran, PLEASE do not take it down. #Irenelection 6:06 p.m. June 15 (mousavil388)

Tehran march TODAY 5pm - 7Tir Sq - Meydan 7 Tir - silent - sea of green - #Irenelection 4:28 a.m. June 17 (persiankiwi)

Unlike your revolution Mr Khamenei, this movement is not "Made in Britain," it is entirely Iranian. #Irenelection #iranelections #Iran 5:23 a.m. June 19 (oxfordgirl)

Today was the 911 of Iran. Down with tyranny. And peace upon Neda's family #Irenelection 9:25 p.m. June 20 (libra0071)

Neda was buried in Behesht Zahra cemetery earlier today, memorial service at mosque canceled on orders from authorities #Irenelection 8:25 p.m. June 21 (libra0071)

Call for a Mass Rally for Tomorrow in front of Parliament! #Irenelection 6:18 a.m. June 23 (omidhabibinia)

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