

# *WORKING PAPER*

The rise of social media and its impact  
on

mainstream journalism:

A study of how newspapers and broadcasters in the  
UK and

US are responding to a wave of participatory social  
media,

and a historic shift in control towards individual  
consumers.

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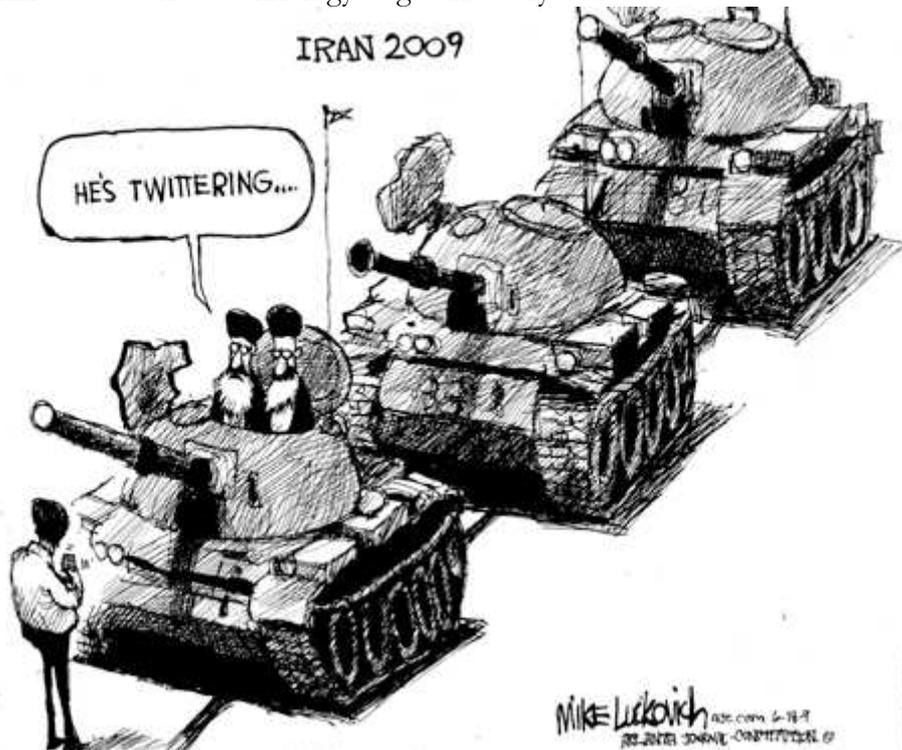
Nic Newman

### 3. Changing coverage

This chapter explores how social media are influencing the way news is reported through two examples: the G20 protests (April 2009) and Iranian street protests (June 2009).

#### 3.1 Iranian election protests, June 2009

The aftermath of the Iranian elections in June 2009 provided further compelling evidence of the power of user-generated footage, but it also highlighted a battle of wills between a government determined to restrict access to information, and an alliance of newspapers, broadcasters and Iranian citizens equally determined to use new technology to get the story out.



**Figure 11.** The so called Twitter revolution as seen by cartoonist Mike Luckovich Used with the permission of Mike Luckovich and Creators Syndicate. All rights refused.

As in previous cases of so-called citizen journalism, it was mobile phones and other digital cameras that captured sometimes bloody street protests against election results, which the opposition said were rigged. Dramatic footage from all over the country was uploaded to video-sharing and social media sites, as well as to mainstream media organisations like CNN and the BBC, which at one stage was receiving up to five videos a minute.

For YouTube spokesman Scott Rubin, his site had become a critical platform for citizen journalism: 'Iranian citizens are having their voices heard, their faces seen and their story gets told around the world without filtering.' But it wasn't just the scale of upload, it was the speed of distribution and way in which social media sites fed and drove the agenda which really marked out this story.

## Attack on students at Shirza University



Posted by: [TaheraAbdi](#) // 7 minutes ago // viewed 22 times

Shiraz, Iran // [embed media](#) <object width="450" height="340"><para

Most of the government forces that attacked the Shiraz University, were speaking Arabic.

It appears that the Iranian military refused attacking its own people and the government as usual is using Palestinian guards.

Share your story

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How to get more info on Iran Protest (In Iran)



Riot police May20 breaking into shops people have take shelter



shooting 20 june teheran video link

**Figure 12.** Photographs and videos uploaded to CNNs' iReport

Much of this activity focused on Twitter, where #Iranelections49 became the central aggregation point for those hungry for news and for those wishing to distribute new pictures or information. During the first week of the protest, a large proportion of outgoing links from Twitter and 60 per cent of all links from blogs were on the subject of Iran, according to an analysis by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), a group that monitors news coverage.<sup>50</sup> In their analysis they found that whilst many of these links started off linking to citizen-generated video, they soon moved to a wider range of issues and concerns. There was extensive linking to commentary in the mainstream media, particularly to reports about the role of social media. And the role of technology was also a major theme, with links to articles such as 'cyberwar for beginners'<sup>51</sup> aimed at telling users in Iran about how to get round internet censorship by setting up proxy servers and how to protect the identity of protesters from the authorities.

An interesting subtext of this story was the difficulties the authorities had in shutting down the flows of information. The government of Iran has one of the most sophisticated and extensive technical filtering systems in the world.<sup>52</sup> The Revolutionary Guard plays an active role in enforcing internet content standards and during the election campaign they had experimented with the blocking of Facebook, which was being widely used by political

49 A hashtag (#) is the convention denoted by the Twitter community as a way of pulling together tweets related to a particular subject.

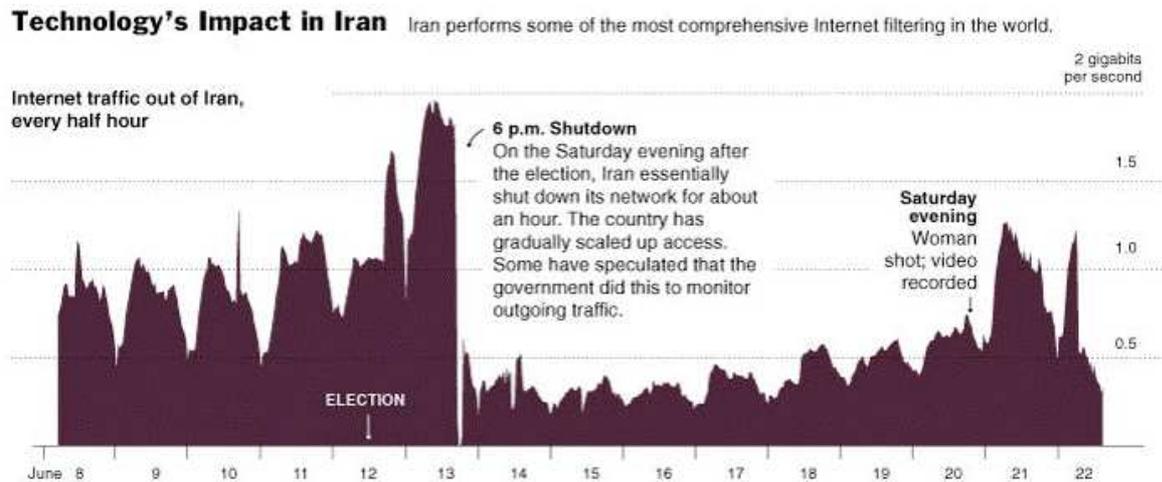
50 'Iran and the Twitter revolution': PEJ, June 2009 ([http://www.journalism.org/index\\_report/iran\\_and\\_%E2%80%9Ctwitter\\_revolution%E2%80%9D](http://www.journalism.org/index_report/iran_and_%E2%80%9Ctwitter_revolution%E2%80%9D))

51 Article by a Scandinavian blogger based in Wales had huge influence being re-tweeted over 1,000 times and being reprinted on other blogs (<http://reinikainen.co.uk/2009/06/iranelection-cyberwar-guide-for-beginners>).

52 Iran country report, Opennet initiative, June 2009 (<http://opennet.net/research/profiles/iran>).

parties.<sup>53</sup> However, Twitter, unlike Facebook, is more like a multi-headed hydra, which does not operate through one set of internet addresses but from hundreds of different applications and interfaces. Close one down and another can open up within minutes. Many of the most dramatic user-generated clips were in fact sent outside Iran by email and then uploaded to social networks outside the country.

The dilemma for the authorities is graphically illustrated in Figure 13, which shows internet traffic out of Iran during the period in question. Connectivity was cut for one hour on 13 June but the authorities in Iran were not prepared to close the system down indefinitely. Stopping its citizens communicating with the outside world would also have stopped a significant amount of vital economic activity.



**Figure 13.** Iran performs some of the most comprehensive internet filtering in the world. Source Arbor Networks and OpenNet initiative (as reported in *New York Times*, June 2009)

With the internet difficult to block, and most people continuing to get news through traditional TV and radio, the Iranian authorities turned their attention to trying to restrict the flow of information coming out of Iran in other ways. The monitoring and harassment of Iran's active blogging community intensified, whilst the movement of Western correspondents was restricted. Many were confined to hotel rooms; others were thrown out of the country. But this had the effect of increasing the value of the citizen journalism and social networks as the protests continued for a second weekend, increasing further the dependence of the mainstream media. Although news outlets acknowledged that they could not independently confirm these accounts, they became a major component of the overall narrative, according to PEJ, with around one in every twenty mainstream stories about Iran dominated by social media footage or news lines about social media.<sup>54</sup> BBC Persian TV found itself having to rely almost exclusively on user-generated footage, after the authorities threatened to throw out anyone supplying them with footage. Richard Sambrook, Head of Global News for the BBC, says this audience content had a double benefit:

53 'Iran's Facebook Access Restored', BBC News, May 2009 ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/8069038.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/8069038.stm)).

54 [http://www.journalism.org/index\\_report/pej\\_news\\_coverage\\_index\\_june\\_15\\_21\\_2009](http://www.journalism.org/index_report/pej_news_coverage_index_june_15_21_2009)

*UGC was valuable in helping report the story, but it goes beyond that because it gives a direct relationship between the service and the people of Iran and it gives them a level of engagement, a level of authenticity which you wouldn't get from conventional television coverage. So actually they've been able to turn a disadvantage into an advantage in that way.*<sup>55</sup>

However, in assessing how to integrate user-generated content into their coverage, mainstream organisations were confronted with some significant dilemmas:

1. There was a huge amount of noise and false information generated by these networks, some of which was deliberately placed to influence the debate
2. There was very little balance on Twitter and other social networks: conversation was overwhelmingly in favour of opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, who tended to attract the support of younger, more computer-literate Iranians, as well as activists in the West.

On the question of accuracy, the webzine *True Slant* identified a series of errors which emerged on Twitter during the weekend of 12/13 June. These errors were then repeated and amplified by other social networks and blogs.

- Three million people were reported to have protested in Tehran. Independent assessments suggested the final numbers were a few hundred thousand.
- Opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi was under house arrest –he was fact just being watched
- The president of the election monitoring committee declared the election invalid. This turned out to be wrong.

Social media expert Clay Shirky says it is inevitable that 'you trade speed for accuracy' by getting updates from Twitter, but he argues that mistakes tend to be corrected quickly when other users contradict misinformation. In this way, corrections can be amplified as well as distortions.<sup>56</sup>

The lack of balance was a particular issue for mainstream organisations. The BBC Persian service found great difficulty in identifying more than a handful of Ahmadinejad supporters for its popular interactive programmes from an inbox of thousands of emails. Turi Munthe, CEO of the citizen journalism website Demotix, spells out the dangers:

*All the blogging, the twittering, the Facebook activity ... is from a self selecting demographic – media switched on, westernised, reformist. We are getting the social media and user generated sites aiding and abetting the mainstream western media view of this as a massive liberal explosion in Iran.*<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Author interview with Richard Sambrook, June 2009.

<sup>56</sup> Reported by Sky News, June 2009 (<http://news.sky.com/skynews/Home/World-News/Iran-Election-Coverage-On-Twitter-Social-Media-Becomes-Vital-Tool-For-Iranian-Citizens/Article/200906315307209>)

<sup>57</sup> *Today Programme* interview, 16 June 2009 ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_8102000/8102226.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_8102000/8102226.stm)).

From the Mousavi perspective this was sometimes seen as a straightforward and legitimate tactic; a corrective for a perceived lack of balance in the coverage within Iran. This tweet from a Mousavi supporter was typical:

*We have no national press coverage in Iran, everyone should help spread Mousavi's message. One Person = One Broadcaster. #IranElection.*<sup>58</sup>

Such grass-roots involvement was supported by more party-based activity. One feed, mousavi1388,59 was filled with exhortations to keep up the fight, in Persian and in English. Mir Hossein Mousavi's Facebook page had over 100,000 members and included regular polls and links to videos and photographs of street protests.



**Figure 14.** Mir Hossein Mousavi's Facebook page announces 'You are the Media, we are one!'

The mainstream media in its coverage took a mainly pragmatic approach to these issues. They felt outflanked in terms of speed, previously an area many had built their brands around, but all felt uncomfortable running unverified reports and made every attempt to find corroboration before publication or broadcast. Lila King, the executive in charge of CNN's iReport, said staff members tried to 'triangulate the details' of an event by corroborating stories with other contributors in a given area. CNN also employed Farsi speakers to listen to the chants of protest videos or identify locations in Tehran.<sup>60</sup> Where they couldn't be sure about the facts, but felt the pictures had the ring of truth, they labelled the pictures accordingly. In total CNN received almost 6,000 Iran-related submissions and approved just over 200 for use on television.

The *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, CNN and the Huffington Post made the information emerging from social networks a central part of their coverage, allocating specific resources to provide a filtered take of the activity on Twitter, Facebook and blogs. On the web, this technique is known as 'live blogging' or 'live text commentary', whilst on TV it involves allocating a social media correspondent to monitor and report directly on activity (see Figures 15 and 16). At the *Guardian*, Matthew Weaver spent ten days

<sup>58</sup> Tweet authenticated and published by the *New York Times*, June 2009.

<sup>59</sup> 1388 is the year in the Persian calendar.

<sup>60</sup> Author interview with Lila King, June 2009.

blogging the events. When rallies and conflicts occur, ‘first the tweets come, then the pictures, then the video and then the wires’, he said. ‘What people are saying at one point in the day is then confirmed by more conventional sources four or five hours later.’<sup>61</sup>

This activity caught the imagination of the White House, which controversially arranged for Huffington Post blogger Nico Pitney to ask a question at President Obama’s regular press conference. The question, asked on behalf of the people of Iran, was chosen by Pitney from a long list of crowdsourced questions from social media sources – the first time this has ever happened.



Figure 15. The Lede Blog at NYT.com kept a running commentary on events.



Figure 16. CNN's Josh Levs in the role of Twitter correspondent (June 2009).

By engaging in this activity, mainstream organisations saw a number of direct benefits during the Iran crisis:

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/29/business/media/29coverage.html>

1. Extended newsgathering possibilities mainly pictures, but also including leads on stories, usually through live blog reporters engaging directly with networks.
2. A single copy-tasting function for social web activity, saving time elsewhere in the organisation and reduced scope for mistakes.
3. An accumulation of credit within communities like Twitter, including a significant number of links back to their websites or broadcasts

These benefits were demonstrated when shocking footage emerged of the death on camera of teenager Neda Agha-Soltan, an apparently innocent bystander to the protests. The footage was identified and edited/sanitised to make it suitable for a mainstream audience. Although verification was difficult, the pictures were published/broadcast with appropriate caveats.

Finally, the journalists used crowdsourcing techniques, and their credit within networks like Twitter, to find out more about Neda and her background. Robert Mackey who writes the Lede Blog for the *New York Times* interviewed correspondents and contacts in Iran to build up a picture, which made it into the main paper and a separate item on New York Times TV.<sup>62</sup> In turn, these follow-up items were heavily recommended via links on Twitter, where a separate #neda tag was set up.

Despite headlines about how Iran had become the first Twitter revolution, there is little evidence (as in Moldova<sup>63</sup> and G20) that it was used as a primary tool for organising protests. Twitter was mainly used to share information around the world, to link to and highlight mainstream media reports and user-generated content. In a sense, Twitter became the real-time glue for highlighting and filtering all of the activity on other websites and social networks. Andrew Keen, author of the critical book *Cult of the Amateur* says the lesson of the Iranian elections is that:

*Twitter is a great real-time tool for distributing opinion, but it is no replacement for curated media coverage of the crisis.*<sup>64</sup>

Indeed, it remains the case that most people still saw the protests through the lens of the mainstream media, either via the websites of major news organisations or particularly via TV bulletins.<sup>65</sup>

Nevertheless, it is significant that, as the PEJ has demonstrated, the social media elements were so prominent and so vital for effective storytelling.

Mark Jones, Head of Communities for Reuters, says that stories like Iran demonstrate that the role of a traditional news organisation in a breaking story is changing significantly:

*Our job now is packaging raw feeds from many sources and filtering it to provide audience big enough to make a difference. It is all becoming much*

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<sup>62</sup> A young woman's fate resonates (<http://video.nytimes.com/video/2009/06/22/world/1194841118796/woman-s-death-asymbol-of-iran-s-crisis.html?hp>).

<sup>63</sup> Twitter was reported to have played a role in organising mass protests against the results of Moldovan elections in April 2009, even though the network had only a tiny number of active users in the country.

<sup>64</sup> <http://news.sky.com/skynews/Home/World-News/Iran-Election-Coverage-On-Twitter-Social-Media-Becomes-Vital-Tool-For-Iranian-Citizens/Article/200906315307209?>

<sup>65</sup> BBC 10 o'clock news averaged over 5m viewers in the week 12–20 June. The BBC website also saw increases in traffic with average daily user counts of 5m during the same period.

*more complex, for journalists who need to monitor a huge number of sources,  
and more complex for consumers too.66*

In future, news organisations are going to need to get used to the fact that they will always be running behind the social networks. Social media evangelists will need to recognise that there will always be a deficit of trust, context and perspective within these networks. Ultimately, consumers will decide how they wish to balance these factors and where they wish to place their trust and their eyeballs.

### **Source Information:**

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