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Iran's Protests: Why Twitter Is the Medium of the Movement

By Lev Grossman

The U.S. State Department doesn't usually take an interest in the maintenance schedules of dotcom start-ups. But over the weekend, officials there reached out to Twitter and asked them to delay a network upgrade that was scheduled for Monday night. The reason? To protect the interests of Iranians using the service to protest the presidential election that took place on June 12. Twitter moved the upgrade to 2 p.m. P.T. Tuesday afternoon — or 1:30 a.m. Tehran time. ([Read "The Iran Election: Twitter's Big Moment."](#))

When Jack Dorsey, Evan Williams and Biz Stone founded Twitter in 2006, they were probably worried about things like making money and protecting people's privacy and drunk college kids breaking up with one another in 140 characters or less. What they weren't worried about was being suppressed by the Iranian government. But in the networked, surreally flattened world of social media, those things aren't as far apart as they used to be — and what began as a toy for online flirtation is suddenly being put to much more serious uses. After the election in Iran, cries of protest from supporters of opposition candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi arose in all possible media, but the loudest cries were heard in a medium that didn't even exist the last time Iran had an election. ([See pictures of Iran's presidential election and its turbulent aftermath.](#))

So what exactly makes Twitter the medium of the moment? It's free, highly mobile, very personal and very quick. It's also built to spread, and fast. Twitterers like to append notes called hashtags — #theylooklikethis — to their tweets, so that they can be grouped and searched for by topic; especially interesting or urgent tweets tend to get picked up and retransmitted by other Twitterers, a practice known as retweeting, or just RT. And Twitter is promiscuous by nature: tweets go out over two networks, the Internet and SMS, the network that cell phones use for text messages, and they can be received and read on practically anything with a screen and a network connection. ([Read about how Twitter is changing the way we live.](#))

This makes Twitter practically ideal for a mass protest movement, both very easy for the average citizen to use and very hard for any central authority to control. The same might be true of e-mail and Facebook, but those media aren't public. They don't broadcast, as Twitter does. On June 13, when protests started to escalate, and the Iranian government moved to suppress dissent both on- and off-line, the Twitterverse exploded with tweets from people who weren't having it, both in English and in Farsi. While the front pages of Iranian newspapers were full of blank space where censors had whited-out news stories, Twitter

was delivering information from street level, in real time:

Woman says ppl knocking on her door 2 AM saying they were intelligence agents, took her daughter

Ashora platoons now moving from valiasr toward National Tv staion. mousavi's supporters are already there. my father is out there!

we hear 1dead in shiraz, livewire used in other cities RT

As is so often the case in the media world, Twitter's strengths are also its weaknesses. The vast body of information about current events in Iran that circulates on Twitter is chaotic, subjective and totally unverifiable. It's impossible to authenticate sources. It's also not clear who exactly is using Twitter within Iran, especially in English. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the bulk of tweets are coming from "hyphenated" Iranians not actually in the country who are getting the word out to Western observers, rather than from the protesters themselves, who favor other, less public media. This is, after all, a country where the government once debated the death penalty for dissident bloggers. ([See pictures of daily life in Iran.](#))

Twitter isn't a magic bullet against dictators. As tempting as it is to think of the service as a purely anarchic weapon of the masses, too distributed to be stoppable, it is theoretically feasible for a government to shut it down, according to James Cowie, CTO of Renesys, a company that collects data on the status of the Internet in real time. While Iran has a rich and diverse Internet culture, data traffic into and out of Iran passes through a very small number of channels. It's technically relatively trivial for the state to take control of those choke points and block IP addresses delivering tweets through them. The SMS network is even more centralized and structured than the Internet, and hence even easier to censor.

But there are counter-countermeasures to this kind of censorship. Sympathetic observers outside Iran have set up "proxies," servers that relay Twitter content into Iran through network addresses that haven't been blocked yet. When the Iranian authorities discover such a proxy, they block it too. It's an arms race crossed with whack-a-mole. Protesters are also organizing denial-of-service attacks against government websites — coordinated efforts to shut down their servers by flooding them with traffic.

Rumors of the Iranian authorities' tampering with Twitter traffic are rampant. But very little hard data is available, and so far it's not clear that they've throttled Twitter completely. Why not is a matter of great speculation. It's quite possible that the government finds Twitter useful as a way of monitoring protesters, gathering data on them and even tracking them down. There are also signs that the Iranian government may be infiltrating the Twitter

network itself, manipulating it to its own advantage. This tweet went out over the network earlier today, and was itself retweeted more than 200 times:

DO NOT RT anything U read from "NEW" tweeters, gvmt spreading misinfo

Twitter didn't start the protests in Iran, nor did it make them possible. But there's no question that it has emboldened the protesters, reinforced their conviction that they are not alone and engaged populations outside Iran in an emotional, immediate way that was never possible before. President Ahmadinejad — who happened to visit Russia on Tuesday — now finds himself in a court of world opinion where even Khrushchev never had to stand trial. Totalitarian governments rule by brute force, and because they control the consensus worldview of those they rule. Tyranny, in other words, is a monologue. But as long as Twitter is up and running, there's no such thing.

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