The Impact of Social Media on Social Movements: A Case Study of the 2009 Iranian Green
Movement and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution

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Significant media attention has been devoted to the role, or lack thereof, that popular forms of social media have played in social movements throughout the last few years. Two prominent examples are the so-called “Twitter Revolution” in Iran (2009) and the “Facebook Revolution” in Egypt (2011). As these events continue to occur, many, especially those in Western cultures, are left wondering whether or not social media platforms are changing the world. In fact, several have gone so far as to claim that social media is opening avenues for democracy in oppressed populations, in that one of the primary purposes behind such technologies is large-scale social interaction. However, opinions exist on both sides of the issue.

I felt this topic worthy of research because of three factors. First, social media is clearly an expanding medium of social interaction, and therefore will likely become only more relevant a topic for discussion and research in the future. Also, the events in Egypt and Iran are applicable to U.S. national interest. Finally, if these mediums were found to have a significant impact on social movements, it may represent an important shift in the way the populations achieve common goals. Also, the resources I knew of only dealt with the issue briefly or generally, without including much detail or variety of evidence.

The approach I took in my attempt to address this question was limited, yet multi-faceted. I ended up using information from books that were written on the events in general, and also searching for scholarly sources of research. However, because the events occurred relatively recently, there is a notable lack of scholarly work on this particular topic. I also used my own Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube accounts to access information only available to subscribers in an attempt to confirm various claims made in other sources, and also to try finding supporting evidence that was not available elsewhere. Finally, I used the websites for Google Trends and
Google Transparency, two useful programs which allow one to view fairly specific data on 
various forms of internet usage in certain regions over set periods of time.

What I discovered confirmed my hypothesis, and was largely in line with many of the 
claims made by popular Western news media, though the media stories tended to exaggerate the 
relevance of social media in these cases. It appears that social media does play a role in the types 
of social movements that occurred in Iran and Egypt, though the effects are unique to each 
situation. The use of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, texting, and similar services enabled 
users to spread information quickly and simply, while allowing them to maintain a degree of 
anonymity. However, it was shown that the Iranian and Egyptian governments were capable of 
interrupting access to these sources, and even using social media themselves to negatively impact 
the progress of the protestors. The most important impact of social media was likely the degree 
to which it allowed the average citizen to quickly gauge the number of people sharing his or her 
beliefs; it is much easier to take such actions if one knows that he or she is not alone in desire or 
resolve. One of the primary factors determining whether or not the movements were successful 
was the action or inaction of military forces; though social media may have been a catalyst or 
facilitator of protests, people still had to march in the streets and enter an environment which 
could be life-threatening.

To further explore the issue, it would be beneficial to perform research on the ground in 
each of these countries, including personal interviews with those who took part in 
demonstrations, because one is limited without the direct access to the people and culture in 
which these events actually occurred. It would also be extremely helpful to possess knowledge of 
languages such as Arabic and Farsi, as much of the social media use was not conducted in 
English.
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I. Introduction/Literature Review

In today’s turbulent political environment, one need only turn on a television or pick up a newspaper to learn of the most recent uprising, protest, or social movement taking place somewhere around the world. Though social movements, or “groups of people with a common ideology who try together to achieve certain general goals” (WordNet, 2003) have likely been occurring, at least to some extent, since the advent of organized human society, modern times have added an element to the resources of revolution (Note: The term “revolution” will be used throughout this paper in a colloquial sense, utilizing the common vocabulary employed by both the media and average citizens who discuss these events), the media. In particular, social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, various blogging sites, and even SMS messaging (texting) have enabled previously disconnected masses of people, who before had no practical way of quickly communicating their perceptions and ideas across significant distances, to instantly share these thoughts. And due to this new technology, among other things, people now have an increased ability to obtain information from the unique perspectives of fellow citizens rather than relying solely on the existing media establishment (Selvik & Stenslie, 2011).

While the global trend suggests an overall increase in the usage of Web 2.0 technology, the Arab region in particular has experienced a recent surge in the use of social media. For example, Arab states, plus Iran, outpaced many of the Top 20 nations (USA, Australia, etc.) in the increase of Facebook penetration (the number of citizens who own a Facebook account) for 2010 (Arab Social Media Report [ASMR], 2011). In addition, as noted by O’Reilly and Milstein, the use of Twitter in these countries has recently increased dramatically, expanding by roughly 1382% in Iran alone between February 2008 and February 2009 (Burns & Eltham, 2009). While the primary idea behind websites such as Facebook and Twitter is for users to expand,
strengthen, and interact with social circles, this process also allows for the accessing of instantly updated communications for events and situations which could take traditional forms of media much longer to thoroughly cover, thereby leading to a heavier reliance on amateur reporting conducted by the average internet user (McCarthy, 2009).

Governments and the private sector have varying degrees of control over the type of information presented by traditional media sources, and therefore hold a relatively significant command over the perceptions maintained by citizens. However, these same bodies are in danger of no longer maintaining the equivalent level of influence over the communication, thoughts, and opinions of their followers. And when the conditions within a state are domineering and free-speech-prohibitive, the ability to access a network containing real-time communication expressed by fellow citizens amplifies the effect of social media, possibly creating conditions ripe for the spread of revolutionary ideas (Peterson, 2010).

One of the instances in which social media certainly played a role in a social movement is the aftermath of the 2009 Iranian Presidential election and the subsequent creation and mobilization of the opposition Green Movement. Sometimes referred to as the “Twitter Revolution,” significant evidence exists of social media being widely used during this time as a form of communication and information-gathering, although several sources argue the inefficacy of the use of Twitter and Facebook in the organization and implementation of this short-lived revolution (Cross, 2010) (Morozov, 2009). Though the use of social media in this specific instance almost certainly did not make or break the success of the movement, the technology likely impacted the course of events in one way or another. If nothing else, social media contributed to the worldwide awareness of the events in Iran as activists sought to spread the word outside of the country's borders by posting a large portion of the social media notifications
(particularly via Twitter) in English (Hounshell, 2011). This social movement was eventually suppressed by the highly-capable Iranian government, which, interestingly, used many of the same tools as the protestors in an effort to disorganize and confuse the opposition. The government provided misinformation and acted as a catalyst for internal confusion by posting conflicting reports of meeting times and locations as well as attempting to turn the perceived leaders of the revolution against one another (Weaver, 2010).

In contrast to the failed uprising in Iran, a recent revolutionary success occurred in Egypt at the beginning of 2011. Previous to this event, an ‘Emergency Law,’ which had been consistently renewed for 30 years by the Egyptian government, had created a system similar to that in Iran, in which the majority of media available to the average citizen was state-run and probably biased (Udomsinvatana, 2011). This system of political media control worked relatively well until provocative events, such as the brutal June, 2010 murder of Khaled Said by Egyptian police, were caught on camera and subsequently uploaded to social media networks including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Through the use of these social media tools, along with the widespread use of SMS messaging, news of abuses such as Said's murder spread rapidly and exponentially grew in effect as more and more Egyptians decided to take advantage of these methods of communication. This shift, from ordinary people following government-supplied news to relying on the public opinion expressed through texting and the internet, seemed to jump-start the organization and involvement processes of protests (e.g. the number of those who “Followed” the Facebook page entitled “We are all Khaled Said” had expanded to over 500,000 by the time demonstrations began in Tahrir Square) (The Week, 2011). Once the movement began, it took only 18 days for the Egyptian people to effectively organize, protest, and oust a leader who had imposed authoritative rule for over 30 years (Al Jazeera and Agencies, 2011).
Now the question exists as to whether or not protests in the modern age are at all different from those of the past, and, if so, whether the use of social media has enabled like-minded individuals to achieve change which may not have been possible under the same circumstances absent these technological tools.

II. Thesis Activity:

To determine the type and scope of the impact social media had on the protests in Iran (2009) and Egypt (2011).

III. Methodology:

In order to obtain the necessary information required for this paper, I primarily conducted archival research, searching for information within peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and other scholarly publications, as well as news articles from well-known organizations. I also used online tools such as Google Trends to search for region- and date-specific internet traffic data related to various websites, as well as my own Facebook and Twitter accounts to confirm some of the claims made within the sources used.

IV. Results and Discussion

A. Background/Setting the Scene

On May 25, 2009, Al Jazeera English reported that the Iranian government had blocked access to Facebook country-wide (Al Jazeera and Agencies, 2009). Though the motives behind this action cannot be accurately determined due to the lack of an official government statement, it is fair to say that the event was in some way related to the upcoming Presidential election in
Iran, which was at the time less than one month away. Mir Hossein Mousavi, one of the leading opponents of the incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was seen by many as having a good chance of being elected as the new President of Iran. Mousavi had capitalized on the significant increases in the use of social media in Iran within the preceding decade, and had built a solid base of supporters through the use of social media platforms (Dabashi, 2010). At the time, the ban on Facebook was thought by some to be a preemptive strike against the organizational powers of the website; especially in regards to Mousavi's campaign, which could have upset the status quo and possibly played a part in the changing of Iranian leadership (OpenNet Initiative [ONI] Iran, 2009).

Before the elections, texting had been used as one of the methods to gauge public support for various candidates. An Iranian man named Ebrahim Mehtari, an activist and software engineer, had the task of using Iranian cell phone networks to conduct a broad, non-scientific survey. At one point, Mehtari used the phone networks to send out approximately 25 million text messages about the upcoming elections. He had determined, from the nine million responses he received, that Mousavi was ahead in terms of public opinion (Peterson, 2010). The fact that Ahmadinejad won re-election by a significant amount led many to believe that the elections had been fraudulent (Quirk, 2009). After the vote, when cell phone networks had been temporarily disabled, Mehtari turned to mass e-mailings and leaflet distribution as his choice for spreading activist messages, and was arrested twice and tortured for his actions (Peterson, 2010).

However, the potential of social media to influence political change should not be inflated out of proportion and seen as a concrete method of mobilizing public support, because it is impossible to determine whether improved or increased social media usage would have made a difference in the aftermath of the June 2009 elections. Though Western media in particular
seems to generally conform to the view that Facebook and Twitter are potent tools which have and will continue to act as driving forces behind the overthrow of non-democratic regimes, there do exist arguments on both sides of the issue.

Many of these opposing arguments present a valid point of view, in that the recent revolutions and social movements are frequently diluted in the media and elsewhere to the point that it seems Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have single-handedly enabled and motivated the people to mobilize, while ignoring the numerous and complicated social, economic, and political factors that without a doubt led to the level of discontent necessary to create the critical mass of civil unrest which would transform into a unified movement (Morozov, 2011). Adding to this argument is the example of Egypt in April 2008, when textile workers protested the extremely low wages provided by the state. In response to the large protest, many youth in Egypt were inspired to show solidarity with the workers by using social media tools to organize a larger social movement throughout the country, which would protest the low wages of the workers as well as rising food prices. In the end, even though the Facebook group called “April 6” (the date for which protests were planned) had attracted more than 64,000 members, and several thousand more supporters in the general online community, the civil unrest soon died down and was overall relatively ineffective (Morozov, 2011) (Al Jazeera and Agencies, 2008). Taking this event into account, it seems that if social media is to have any significant effect on social movements, certain conditions must be in place which would enable the organizational and informational powers of social networks to translate into a successful revolutionary event.

**B. Internet and Social Media in Iran and Egypt**
A report published in May 2011 entitled *The Arab Social Media Report* was the second such document in a planned series by the Dubai School of Government aimed at examining the increasing use of social media throughout Arab states, plus Iran (ASMR, 2011). This report uses a variety of sources to facilitate the creation of its numerous graphs and data sets, including the use of a tool called Google Transparency which allows users to create and view customized graphs pertaining to certain types of internet usage in specific regions around the world over a set period of time. While Google Transparency primarily provides data for Google products (Blogger, Youtube, etc.) it is still very interesting to see how certain segments of the internet are and were being used at particular points in time (Google Transparency Report).

Unfortunately, producing the same amount and type of data on social media usage in Iran is a more difficult task than finding the equivalent information for Egypt. For example, it is noted in the Arab Social Media Report that American technology export laws prevent Facebook from reporting the same type of data about Iranian users as it does about users in many other countries (ASMR, 2011). This is corroborated by the complete lack of Facebook penetration data for Iran on other internet statistic sites (Internet usage in the Middle East, 2011), and means that most data regarding social media usage in Iran should be taken with a grain of salt.

As of December 2010, Iranian Facebook penetration was estimated at 0.17 percent, second only to Somalia in the lowest-ranking countries studied in the first edition of the Arab Social Media Report. However, the Digital Access Index (a measurement of the average citizen's ability to access the internet) of Iran was estimated at 44% during the same time period, compared to Egypt's 40%, signifying that relatively few Iranians within the much larger online community were visiting Facebook (the number of Facebook users as a percentage of overall internet users was thought to be around 1.51% for Iran, compared to 22.61% in Egypt).
Furthermore, as of December 2010, Iran was rated a 5 on a scale of 1-20 measuring Internet Freedom (where 1=pervasive filtering and 20=no evidence of filtering) while Egypt was rated at 20 (ASMR, 2009). It is possible that due to the heavy filtering in Iran, the public had less access to certain popular social media platforms in 2009 than Egyptians enjoyed in 2011.

**B1. Iran**

Comprising just over 50% of the internet users throughout the Middle East, Iran maintains the lead in internet penetration rates throughout the region (46.9%). The country has also seen the most rapid growth in internet usage, from a mere 250,000 users in December 2000 to approximately 36.5 million in mid-2011 (Internet usage in the Middle East, 2011). Though only a small percentage of the 36.5 million Iranian internet users write in a blog, the Persian blogging community is considered one of the largest and most active in the world, with current estimates ranging from 60,000 to 110,000 active blogs (ONI Iran, 2009) (Etling, Kelly & Faris, 2009). However, it should be kept in mind that Iranian mobile-phone usage far outpaces internet usage, even in regards to political activities (Quirk, 2009).

Internet access was fairly widespread in Iran as of 2009, though the government is known for its heavy use of filtering technologies and general control of media sources. A section of the Iranian Constitution regarding 'Mass-Communication Media' makes it clear that a citizen's options are limited when accessing and using traditional media, stating that “To this end, the media should be used as a forum for healthy encounter of different ideas, but they must strictly refrain from diffusion and propagation of destructive and anti-Islamic practices” (Tschentscher, 2010). This relatively vague language seems to leave a good deal of interpretation up to the
government of Iran, which even began producing its own internet filtering capabilities in order to reduce reliance on foreign technology (ONI Iran, 2009).

One of the key components of internet control in Iran is the severe limitations placed on bandwidth availabilities in households. In October 2006, Iran's Ministry of Communications and Information Technology forbade internet service providers from making available any speed above 128 kilobits per second (kbps) for household use. This seems counter-intuitive to the direction the infrastructure was progressing in Iran, which had a rapidly expanding fiber-optic network between 2005 and 2007 that would have been capable of supporting internet speeds much greater than 128 kbps. Regarding this regulation, Iran’s Minister of Information and Communications, Mohammad Soleimani, stated that the lack of demand for faster connection speeds led to the bandwidth cap. Furthermore, internet service providers who marketed to the public were required to route their services through the state-controlled Telecommunication Company of Iran (TCI), providing an additional level of state monitoring over household internet access (ONI Iran, 2009).

**B2. Egypt**

Accurate data on exactly how many Egyptians use the internet is difficult to acquire. A report citing statistics from the UN Agency for Information and Communication Technologies puts the most recent estimate for Egyptian internet users at approximately 20 million (about 25% of the population), which is a dramatic increase from the 450,000 users as of December 2000 (Internet usage statistics for Africa, 2011). While many of these users access the internet at home, it has been noted that a large number of the Egyptian internet-using population utilizes internet cafes to go online rather than household connections (ONI Egypt, 2009). It is also
important to keep in mind that the use of cell phones among Egyptians is much higher, as in Iran, than the use of internet, with a mobile phone penetration rate of ~80% (65.488 million subscribers) as of January, 2011 (Le Coq, 2011).

While the internet can be used for any number of activities, blogging is one of the most common in Egypt, with up to 160,000 existing Egyptian blogs by mid-2008 (ONI Egypt, 2009). Comprising nearly one third of the entire Arabic blogging community, Egyptian blogs tend to break down into several topical categories, ranging anywhere from poetry to political reform. Of those bloggers who write of political reform (including expressing opinions on human rights and detailing instances of government abuse), the most prolific authors tend to be members of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is surprising, because though the organization was officially banned from political organization in Egypt, there did not seem to be a problem with the group promoting their message online. Another interesting fact about the Muslim Brotherhood within the Egyptian blogging community is that the members are much more likely (78%) to post using their real names rather than under “anonymous” or an imagined pseudonym, as is the case with most Egyptian bloggers. It has even been argued that within the Arab online community, Egyptian bloggers in general are among the most politically active, in that they are more likely to belong to political movements rather than merely write about political opinions. The authors of a study examining Arabic blogging claim that Egypt is one of the few countries with large-scale political clustering similar to the blog environment of the United States and a few other politically active “blogospheres,” such as Iran’s. One of the largest topical clusters of blogs were those of the “secular reformists,” who tended to be critical of the Mubarak regime and included members of the Kefaya movement, itself one of the most well-known groups of political activists.
in Egypt (Etling et al., 2009). In fact, it is possible that most of the politically-active bloggers in Egypt initially came from within the ranks of the Kefaya movement (Isherwood, 2008).

Overall, the Egyptian blogging environment serves as a useful forum for discussion between both members within a particular group and non-affiliated users who stop by to comment, debate, or read the blogs for personal reasons. It is noted that blogging within the Arab world as a whole has the potential, and has seen some progress toward, promoting cooperation between disparate groups such as secular and Islamist reformers within Egypt, and creating a legal avenue for discussion regarding the Muslim Brotherhood. These online networks can also contribute to interaction between similar communities, creating an online source of opinion formation, debate, knowledge acquisition, and goal setting (Etling et al., 2009).

Facebook penetration in Egypt, as of May 2011, was approximately 5.5%. While this number seems quite low, especially when compared to the much higher penetration rates in countries such as the United States, this 5.5% accounts for over 4.5 million users country-wide (ASMR, 2011). It should be kept in mind that while only 4.5 million in a country of approximately 82 million had Facebook accounts, the personal networking capabilities of each person with an account had the potential to dramatically increase the number of those with second or third-hand access to the information (Dabashi, 2010). Furthermore, data suggests that the rate of Facebook penetration in Egypt noticeably rose in correspondence with the protests in early 2011 when compared to the same time period the year before; rising 12% in January to April 2010, and 29% in January to April 2011, which translates to approximately two million new Facebook accounts being created in Egypt during the first four months of 2011. While this data does not make clear the reason behind the increase, it is interesting to note the correlation (ASMR, 2011).
In a poll of Egyptian and Tunisian Facebook users aimed at determining the primary use of Facebook during each country's recent revolution, the Dubai School of Government found some interesting results. Out of 126 Egyptian respondents, only 15.45% of the answers reflected the opinion that Facebook was used for either “Entertainment and social uses” or “Other” during the social movement, while purposes relating to activism were scored much higher (“Raise awareness inside the country on the causes of the movements” = 30.93%; “Spread information to the world about the movement and related events” = 24.05%; and “Organize actions or manage activists (teams or individuals)” = 29.55%) (ASMR, 2011). However, the low number of respondents may suggest that the only users who took the time to respond to the survey were those who were already active within the Facebook community, making them more likely to have been active online during the revolution and possibly creating a bias.

As for the use of Twitter in Egypt, the data shows a similar story. While there are more Facebook accounts belonging to Egyptians than Twitter accounts, it is not necessarily indicative of one medium having more impact than the other; Egypt had about 131,204 active (meaning those who Tweet regularly) Twitter users as of March 30, 2011, though only 15-20% of Twitter users are usually “active,” which signifies that many more merely read the posts of other users without contributing their own content. Twitter is shown in the Arab Social Media Report to have been used widely before, during, and after the 2011 revolution (ASMR, 2011).

One statistic shows the data on the volume of daily Tweets throughout Egypt from January 1, 2011 to February 28, 2011. The data set begins at January 1, with about 13,500 daily Tweets originating in Egypt. At the time of the protests in nearby Tunisia on January 14th, daily Egyptian Tweets jumped to around 26,000 and fell steadily, until the number reached a relative low of around 8,000 per day during the internet blackout of January 28th through February 2nd.
Once internet access was restored the number of daily Tweets rose dramatically, peaking at around 34,000 per day on February 11th, the day Hosni Mubarak stepped down from office. The month of February ended at approximately 17,500 Tweets per day, showing a daily increase from the beginning of January to the end of February of about 4,000 Tweets. Furthermore, the top trending “hashtags,” or topics Twitter users used to categorize messages and enable others to search for common themes, showed a strong relationship to Egyptian events during the first quarter of 2011; two of the top five hashtags in the first three months of 2011 were directly related to Egypt: #Egypt (mentioned 1.4 million times during this period) and #jan25 (mentioned 1.2 million times), while number five of the top five, #protest (620,000 mentions), could have in part related to events in Egypt (ASMR, 2011).

However, in comparison with the rest of the Arab region, Egypt had one of the lowest Twitter penetration rates as of the publishing of the Arab Social Media Report. Part of this is likely due to the fact that at the time, Twitter had no option for an Arabic interface, so users were forced to navigate the site in English or another of the supported languages. The Twitter distribution throughout Egypt was also very concentrated, with 51% of the accounts originating in Cairo, 8% in Alexandria, and the remaining accounts being spread throughout the country (ASMR, 2011).

Though Egyptians had readily-available access to the internet and mobile phone networks, this does not mean that the Egyptian government ignored the usage of such modes of communication. In contrast with the Iranian Government which heavily censored online content, the Mubarak regime inhibited freedom of the press while controlling the flow of information available to Egyptian citizens; legislation passed in July 2008 stated that journalists and broadcasters should “avoid damaging 'social peace,’ ‘national unity,’ ‘public order,’ and ‘public
values,”” with corresponding punishments being set for rule-breakers, ranging from fines to imprisonment. In regards to internet-specific regulation, the government proposed legislation in the same year requiring those Egyptians who accessed the internet via internet cafes to submit personally-identifiable information such as a name, email address, and phone number before internet access was to be allowed. In addition to monitoring general online activity, the government also used third-party sources to learn the identity of protestors; in one example the company Vodafone supplied mobile phone communications data to Egyptian authorities, which may have been used in the eventual arrest of 22 protestors during the April 2008 protests (ONI Egypt, 2009). Furthermore, the Egyptian government was not averse to taking actions to severely limit internet access within the country, as seen during the shutdown of virtually all internet connections in Egypt for a period of five days starting on January 27, 2011 (Google Transparency Report). However, the previously-mentioned poll published in the Arab Social Media report showed that 56% of respondents felt that the internet shutdown in Egypt was positive, in that it led to a direct increase in public activism and participation.

C. The Revolutions

It is clear that the revolutions which took place in Egypt and Iran were not the same. Each event had its own unique underlying causes, each group of protesters had a distinct set of goals, and each outcome was different by the time the movements were recognized as having run their course. That being said, the two revolutions prove useful in a comparison study as each has been declared, at least by some, a “social media revolution.” Examining how each set of would-be and actual revolutionaries used social media resources to influence the momentum and formation of
their cause may bring a deeper understanding of the potential for such resources to drive change in all societies, not just those seen to be under particularly authoritative rule.

**C1. Iran**

In the days and weeks leading up to the 2009 Iranian Presidential election, there was little talk or action that would suggest the emergence of an opposition social movement. In fact, because Iranian citizens generally believed that they would soon have the chance to either democratically elect a new President or choose to uphold the current system, there was no need to protest much of anything related to the current leadership of the country; existing grievances could be addressed via the voting booth. However, most Iranians were not expecting the level of election fraud that was thought to have occurred when the votes were finally tallied. Once the election results were announced, a wave of indignation swept through supporters of the opponent Mousavi, as well as others who were angry at the general situation. It should not have come as a surprise that Iranians would protest, because according to some, “Street protests are as Iranian as apple pie is American” (Peterson, 2010).

Prior to and during the Presidential elections, social media was widely used throughout Iran to gain support for candidates and spread information. Mousavi, the lead opponent to the incumbent regime in the election, was very active in building a strong social media platform for his campaign. He took the initiative early on to create both a Facebook page (nearly 229,000 “Likes” as of December 2011) (http://www.facebook.com/mousavi ) and Twitter account (nearly 25,000 followers before the account became inactive) (http://twitter.com/#!/mousavi1388 ) in order to gain support and advertise his points of view, while his supporters used these same resources as well as SMS messaging to “spread the word.” After the voting results were released,
with Ahmadinejad securing his reelection at over 62% of the vote and Mousavi trailing behind at 34%, many felt that the election had been tampered with in some way by the current government, because the general opinion among the online community and those on the street was that Mousavi would at least come in at a close second. Those who either supported Mousavi or merely desired a closer look/recall of the votes texted, Tweeted, and posted online to advertise their views of the supposedly-rigged election and to call for Iranians to protest in the streets of Tehran (Quirk, 2009).

An example of this approach was the website started by Mohsen Sazegara, one of the founders of the Revolutionary Guard who increased his activities as a political reformist activist following the June elections. Sazegara's site was partially a source where citizens could gain access to the works of Gene Sharp, a former researcher at Harvard University who wrote on the means for success in non-violent political change, but also a spot where Sazegara would post videos of himself encouraging the use of nonviolence during the protests in Iran. At its height of popularity (late 2009), the website was said to have been receiving approximately two thousand emails per day, many of which contained information about suggested protesting tactics which would later be incorporated into new videos posted by Sazegara (Peterson, 2010). Internet resources such as Sazegara’s website embodied one of the emerging aspects of social media, the creation of a sense of solidarity among those who sought to bring about social and/or political change.

Sazegara was far from alone in turning to social media to access the powers of the online community. One Twitter user, Arik Fraimovich, started a campaign called “Help Iran Election,” asking other users to modify their profile pictures on the website to have a green tint in order to show support for the adopted color of the burgeoning movement; within two weeks, 160,000
users were following Fraimovich's campaign, though it is unclear how many were Iranian citizens and how many were foreigners. Another tactic suggested by the online community was for Twitter users to alter the time-zone associated with their account to that of Tehran, in an effort to complicate the job of Iranian censors; this campaign in particular received a significant amount of foreign support as people in many other countries suddenly conducted their online activities using Tehran's time-zone. Less notable but similar ideas also spread around the internet, such as organizations calling themselves “Anonymous Iran” and “Haystack” attempting to open up access to censored international news coverage, and a campaign called Sea of Green's attempt to elicit support from United Way (Burns et al, 2009). While this type of activity is certainly not unique in a revolutionary environment, it does mark a change. Whereas at one time activists printed pamphlets or made signs to express their support or lack thereof for a particular cause, the process had become immeasurably faster in a world where one person’s Tweet could instantly appear on the cell phones or computers of tens of thousands of people within the city or around the world.

While citizens were quick to protest the results of the election, the Iranian regime lost no time in continuing its common practice of media censorship. Before the elections, the government had taken several actions that seemed to target social media and political opposition in particular. In February 2009 the website www.yaarinews.ir, created for the possible new campaign of former President Mohammad Khatami, was shut down. Prior to that, a popular website supporting reformist political ideas was blocked in March 2008. In addition, there was a growing list of censored blogs throughout Iran.

A study conducted in order to determine the extent of blog censorship found that out of a subset comprising the most-connected blogs, 9% were officially blocked by the Iranian
government, and a majority of those blocked contained subject matter such as reformism and secular politics (it is important to note that many blogs seemingly in line with the government’s ideals were also blocked, and the study concluded that while there seemed to be a systematic targeting of dissident blogs, the results also showed a noticeable degree of randomness). In addition to the censoring of specific blogs, many blog hosting websites were restricted altogether, such as livejournal.com and xanga.com, along with popular social-media websites including MySpace.com, Orkut.com, Flickr.com, bebo.com, metacafe.com, photobucket.com, Facebook.com (blocked from approximately Fall 2008 to February 2009), and YouTube.com (intermittent censorship in the past, blocked temporarily in June 2009). Various sources have claimed that Iran has anywhere from five to ten million websites blocked at any one time, but it is likely that a large number of these are websites that provide access to material considered immoral by the Iranian government, such as pornography (ONI Iran, 2009).

After the 2009 revolution had run its course, there was a sense of irony in the eventual failure to achieve change; a similar type of people-inspired movement several years prior had paved the way for the Ahmadinejad regime. However, perhaps because Ahmadinejad’s government knew of the potential power of a such a force, there was no tolerance for a recurrence of past events. The Basij military forces loyal to the Iranian government were utilized to make sure that the protestors appreciated the frailty of their existence; whether it was by arrest or explicit violence, the response to anti-government or anti-Ahmadinejad activities was quick and decisive.

The initial protests, which drew large numbers of supporters and occurred frequently, began to diminish in the face of a trained and weapon-bearing body whose job it was to quell any new uprisings. In addition, Iran began to empty of foreign journalists as they were either jailed,
compelled to leave due to the expiration of their non-renewable visas (Majd, 2011), or were unable to report after the forced closure of their Tehran-based offices (Arabiya was closed for one week during the period after the elections) (Quirk, 2009). Furthermore, the online presence of news-based and political sources encountered resistance within Iran following the election. BBC executives claimed that their World News and Persian TV channels had ceased functioning, Yahoo Messenger was reported to have been blocked, and access was cut off to “at least 20” political websites that were in some way related to Mir Hussein Mousavi. In addition, online users who had previously been able to bypass censorship through the use of proxy servers found their work more difficult after government entities had noticed the loophole and began to focus on preventing this method of circumvention (Schachtman, 2009). Through the crackdown on these sources of information, a situation was created in which both the Iranians and the outside world were less exposed to knowledge of the abuses by government forces that were to occur.

However, the cutting off of several media services left a void which could be filled by the readily-available technologies waiting in the pockets of the protesters. The mobile phones which had previously been used for taking pictures of family and friends began to serve a different purpose and capture pictures and video of protests in the streets, along with instances of government abuse, which could be subsequently uploaded to the internet and easily distributed. It is difficult to determine whether the primary purpose behind the sharing of this media was for domestic circulation or to spread information outside of the country, but either way, the citizens of Iran, along with the rest of the world, began to pick up on these new and very localized streams of information (Dabashi, 2010).

An example of the impact this sort of amateur reporting had was the death of Neda Soltan on June 20, 2009, whose murder on the streets of Tehran was uploaded to the internet after being
filmed on a cell phone. This event caused a strong reaction among Iranian citizens who had yet another tangible example of the lack of personal security in their country (Buxton, 2009). The Iranian government responded to the obvious public outrage at this video by claiming that Soltan's death had been an attempt at propaganda and staged by foreign agencies (Burns et al, 2009), which was probably not a surprising response, as the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in particular was considered by many to be a “propaganda machine” (Alfoneh, 2009). Another such video, entitled “Deadly Iran Protest on Camera,” also gained a significant amount of attention as it depicted large crowds of protestors and a clash between citizens and authorities which resulted in up to seven deaths. This idea for using social media to capture and document events in a country with increasingly strict censorship and a lack of non-state-sponsored journalists was taken up and spread by those who used the technology, with many online posts recommending that others begin to use their mobile phones to paint an accurate picture of what was happening in the streets. Once they hit the internet, the pictures, videos, and messages posted by these average citizens were seen within Iran and around the world, as one analyst claimed, “from Isfahan to Indianapolis” (Quirk, 2009).

In June of 2009, Scott Rubin, a spokesman for the popular video-sharing site YouTube, told BBC News that traffic to the website from Iran was down by 90%, which indicated that those within the country were denied access to the site. Rubin was also of the opinion that “The real story of this election is being told by the citizen,” and commented on YouTube’s role in circumventing Iranian content-filtering systems. The service CitizenTube was developed by YouTube to act as a resource for examining the ways in which people communicate through video. This resource enabled, probably inadvertently, many citizens at all levels of technological
skill to participate in the increasingly-common use of proxy servers in bypassing censorship by hosting How-To videos posted by users on configuring these systems.

However, CitizenTube and YouTube were not the only sources of instructions for this type of online action. A 25 year old IT Director out of San Francisco saw an enormous increase in the traffic to his website after posting step-by-step instructions on the configuration of proxy servers; user visits to Austin Heap’s website exploded from ~30-50 users per day to over 100,000 in a 24-hour period. In addition to this significant increase in the use of his website, Heap also claimed to have received a large number of emails from Iranians who were thankful for the availability of his service (Shiels, 2009). In addition to using proxy servers to avoid the Iranian government’s active role in censorship, many protestors also became more active online fighting back in a manner similar to the methods being used by government entities.

After the election, a wave of denial-of-service attacks (online efforts to overload servers) sprung up out of Tehran and elsewhere. Protestors used mediums such as Twitter and Facebook to post encouragement for participation in the effort and directions on how to use the internet as a tool for disabling government servers. A large amount of the denial-of-service activities took place on June 13, which was followed that evening by a government shutdown of internet services lasting approximately 20 hours. Following the reintroduction of service, sources such as Facebook and the website for BBC news were blocked from public access. However, those who had been advocating the denial-of-service activities before the internet blackout resumed efforts and branched out to other media sources such as Google Docs to spread the same information (Moscaritolo, 2009).

Even though sites such as Facebook were sometimes blocked in Iran, effectively restricting the methods of mass-communication previously available to activists, Twitter turned
out to be a form of social media which was more difficult to suppress due to its versatility in functioning both on internet and SMS networks. While many state media sources were attempting to divert attention from the protests or shed a negative light on the activities of protestors, Twitter was teeming with entirely different types of messages, such as “Woman says ppl knocking on her door 2 AM saying they were intelligence agents, took her daughter” and “Ashora platoons now moving from valiasr toward National Tv staion. mousavi's supporters are already there. my father is out there!” (Grossman, 2009). Though these very emotional appeals surely caused a sympathetic reaction among readers, they exhibit one of the primary drawbacks of social media, that the system provides mostly unverifiable information in the form of opinions and un-sourced claims, such as the examples above. This situation can be improved when sites like Twitter and Facebook are used to provide links to more reliable resources, but when most of the news sources typically accessed via the internet or television are censored, this task becomes more difficult.

Along with the challenge of verifying the truth of “news” spread through social media networks comes the problem of identity verification. While many may have believed that the majority of Tweets and posts regarding the protests in Iran originated from within the country, some claim that a significant portion of those users were in fact people (though possibly still Iranians) who were merely contributing to the discourse from their location somewhere outside of the country. This lack of clear and distinguishable identities throughout the online community swings two ways, in that it also opens the door for those who do not support current activist activities to infiltrate and disrupt processes (such as organization and the spread of accurate information) for their own purposes. Several sources note the likelihood that elements of the Iranian government posted conflicting or false information online under the guise of fellow
activists during the period following the elections (Moscaritolo, 2009); one of the messages exhibiting this fear was Re-Tweeted over 200 times, “DO NOT RT [Re-Tweet] anything U read from "NEW" tweeters, gvmt spreading misinfo” (Grossman, 2009).

As noted, many have supported the idea that Iranian government forces used social media to disrupt and disorient the protests, while several even claim that authorities such as the Basij paramilitary troops used Twitter to determine the locations of dissidents in order to detain or harm them. The Revolutionary Guard and Basij forces also diversified their tactics by claiming that they would create several thousand blogs, likely as some form of “war of the words” strategy or an attempt to undermine and dilute the current system of Iran-related blogs (ONI Iran, 2009). During the same period in which these two entities would supposedly create the contradictory blogs they explicitly warned citizens, in a manner that suggested threats of violence, to avoid contributing to blogs that were deemed to “create tension” (Schachtman, 2009) (Burns et al, 2009).

C2. Egypt

As was seen in the example of the April 6, 2008 attempt at a movement for social change, Egyptians in general (and youth in particular) were primed for mobilization, needing only enough of a push to gather momentum. While it is nearly impossible to declare one moment as the tipping point for the kind of movement that eventually toppled the Mubarak regime in early 2011, it is fairly simple to point out numerous events which all likely contributed to the formation of the critical mass necessary to result in change. It is probable that the Mubarak administration's previous attempt to reform the Egyptian economic model, partially in an effort to secure access to IMF and World Bank funds, caused the public to seek further improvements
after experiencing the benefits of an expanding economy; as Alexis de Tocqueville noted, “the
most dangerous moment for a bad government is when it begins to reform itself” (Zakaria,
2011). It is also possible that smaller events contributed to the collective desire for change, and
may have had even more of an effect by adding a human element to the situation.

By the time the revolution officially started in January, 2011, the internet had been used
extensively as a medium to describe and condemn government actions such as police and
security force brutality. The story of Khaled Said turned into one of the most well-known
examples of the lack of security citizens had under the Mubarak regime, but there were also
many other similar stories that circulated around the web. In one instance, a university student
posted to his blog that he had been beaten by police after tripping on a train platform (Ghosh,
2011). Another example involves the 2007 sentencing of an Egyptian blogger to four years in
prison on charges of “incitement to hatred of Islam” and insulting the President on his blog.
More recently, the editor of the blog “Matabbat” was arrested and charged with “offending the
state institutions, destabilizing public security, and inciting others to demonstrate and strike via
the Internet” in August, 2008 (ONI Egypt, 2009).

Declared by many to be one of the most effective videos at garnering mass public support
prior to the Egyptian Revolutions was a video posted by Asmaa Mahfouz on her Facebook page
on January 19th, and later uploaded to YouTube (over 141,000 views as of December 2011). In
the video, Mahfouz (who happens to be one of the former leaders of the April 6 Youth
Movement) stated that she and others had previously wanted to protest in Tahrir Square,
following the self-immolation of four Egyptians protesting the Mubarak regime, but only a few
people joined her. She used the video to call out to those who were too timid to protest in the
streets, using her gender to challenge men in particular to be as brave as a woman (which was a
particularly strong statement in a society where women were typically seen to fulfill a more traditional role) and join her in protest on January 25th. Following the posting of this video, many viewers posted their own responses, holding signs similar to the one held by Mahfouz, and a large flyer distribution campaign soon emerged in support of the January 25th protest. What was interesting about Mahfouz’ call for support was that she had abandoned the typical anonymity behind which most internet users at the time remained.

Though Mahfouz certainly did not build the support for the protests by herself, it is possible that she was one of the few “sparks” that caused the waiting cascade of discontent to emerge. Mahfouz was one of the five members of the Arab Spring to receive the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, awarded by the European Parliament, in 2011 for her role in the Egyptian revolution (European Parliament News “Sakharov prize…,” 2011), and during an interview with the same organization expressed her feelings that, “Social media was the alternative media for us. This is how we managed to convey to people what we were going through and reveal to them the reality of Mubarak's regime. We announced our demonstrations and got people to participate in them. Social media was key to reaching critical mass” (European Parliament News “Sakharov winner…,” 2011). Asmaa Mahfouz had over 164,000 Followers on Twitter as of December 2011 (http://twitter.com/#!/AsmaaMahfouz).

Interestingly, several of the prominent activists who would eventually use social media to spread the word and organize during the 2011 revolution had previously been sent to the United States in 2008 as part of a USAID program called “Egypt Blogs America,” aimed at covering the US Presidential elections. While the Egyptian revolution was an entirely different experience, many of these bloggers had gained direct exposure to using online media to discuss and analyze political events, as well as spreading news and opinions to the larger online community. It is said
that these new “citizen journalists” were straddling the line between political activism and journalism, and were well aware of the possibility of retribution from hostile government forces (Pintak, 2011, March 6).

The Mubarak regime had already showed its willingness and ability to disrupt social networking capabilities in May of 2008, when mobile phone providers were requested to block service to anonymous subscribers. The government claimed that its motives at the time were in the interest of public security, but actions such as the raid of a Cairo broadcasting company and subsequent confiscation of transmission equipment following the station’s broadcast of anti-government protests seemed to send a different message; this same company was eventually forced to shut down, and three other satellite channels were dropped from the Egyptian state satellite system for similar reasons (ONI Egypt, 2009). Overall, the regime seemed to struggle with the methods for limiting media access as they resorted to several distinct tactics in a “shotgun effect” of attempted censorship: Egyptian state television employees who were sympathetic to protestors were dismissed on indefinite leave; attempts at blocking sites such as Facebook and Twitter largely failed as activists were able to assist each other in spreading the idea of using proxy servers to access the internet and thereby skirt the government’s roadblocks; state television would broadcast, in turn, video of the protests followed by wide panoramas of the city which expressed a more peaceful atmosphere (Pintak, 2011, January 31); and the failure to shut off Al Jazeera’s streaming into Egypt when the company responded by using an alternate route of communication to continue broadcasting (Al Jazeera’s actions were amplified when several other satellite broadcasters replaced their own coverage with Al Jazeera's) (Pintak, 2011, February 02). During this time of obvious government interference in the media, citizens were wondering about the results should the government be successful; a message sent from an
Egyptian via Twitter captures this sense of uncertainty, “We were so scared yesterday that (we) would be completely disconnected. But somehow the world is watching us and it feels great.” It is clear that though the Egyptian government may have been partially successful at limiting the networks of discontent, they could not entirely achieve their goals, as Lawrence Pintak makes the observation that “It is no longer possible for a country of 80 million people to go off the grid” (Pintak, 2011, January 31).

When the Mubarak administration eventually cut off a larger portion of access to internet services and cell phone networks, they severely limited public access to these forms of media. But they also caused the likely-unintended result of funneling attention to the unaffected satellite television networks. This option was possible in part due to the introduction of Al Jazeera into Egypt in 1996, which provided an alternative to the limited Arab-language news options. This is significant partially because of the level of control Egypt historically had over its media outlets, (an example occurred during the war with Israel in 1967, when the state-sponsored television declared Egyptian victory; the public did not know the real news until approximately three days later). Lawrence Pintak notes that this new option of satellite news coverage as an alternative to state-sponsored media allowed the Egyptian public to be more aware of events taking place within their own country, regardless of the government’s desire to censor, “As recently as the mid-1990s, they might not have even known the protests were taking place” (Pintak, 2011, January 31).

Along with the change from citizens following mostly-state media to mostly-commercial media, the journalists themselves have altered their reporting methods, as noted by a survey conducted by Pintak in 2009, “A survey my team carried out…found that the vast majority of Arab journalists see creating political and social change as their primary mission.” Whatever the
motivation of these new Arab journalists, their opinions and bias in covering the news throughout the world translates into an altered worldview of those watching at home (Pintak, 2011, January 31). Though television is not classified as social media, it is increasingly interacting with this new set of tools as journalists both use social media themselves, and are able to acquire an up-to-the-minute stream of information which could alert them to a newsworthy story; an average person with a cell phone or internet connection can send out Tweets, posts, or videos about an event before the major media organizations even know what is happening (Hill, 2010).

V. Conclusion

During the initial stages of the revolutions in Iran and Egypt, social media certainly played a role in spreading awareness of the instances of government abuse and general discontent as more people expressed their opinions online of the current conditions within the state, and sometimes uploaded videos which supported their claims. It is also apparent that the governments of both countries considered social media-related activities important, considering the actions they took to limit citizens’ access to these mediums. However, those who “Like,” “Follow,” or join groups related to social movements are also susceptible to the phenomenon known as “slacktivism,” in which they voice support for the cause but do not commit to action. It is likely that many of those who eventually stood up in protest against their government were originally relatively inactive in the fight for change (Morozov, 2011). Of course, the presence and use of social media does not in and of itself spark revolution. Many factors must align in order for a resistance movement to emerge that is capable of realizing its goals, with broad-based
support across many diverse socio-economic sectors being one of the critical components to overall success (Goldstone, 2011).

Focusing solely on the impact that social media had on these two revolutions, it is clear that both sides of the issue are partially correct. Those who say that Facebook, Twitter, etc. allowed oppressed citizens to organize more effectively and access information about current events that would have previously been censored or filtered by the government are right; thousands of people in each country used YouTube to watch videos captured via mobile phone, read or posted Tweets with messages ranging from a cry for help to rants about the political system, joined Facebook pages commemorating those who lost their lives in the struggle for change, and the list goes on. But those who argue that people too often ignore the more complex factors at the root of discontent, and instead focus on the possibility that social media played the decisive factor in overthrowing corrupt governments, are also correct; Iranians would probably not have protested in June 2009 if they did not feel as though their freedom to choose was abolished through government tampering in the elections, and Egyptians likely would not have protested in early 2011 had the Mubarak regime not been so openly repressive and corrupt. Iranians wanted to go back to the polls and fix the wrong that had been done to them, while Egyptians wanted to rid themselves of their current government.

Furthermore, each revolution had different outcomes. The Iranians are still living under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, but the Egyptians ousted Hosni Mubarak in less than 20 days. The reasons for these stark contrasts likely involve a myriad of factors, including the actions of armed forces within each country (Egyptian military refused to get involved and in fact ended up supporting the citizens, while the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Basij quickly and ruthlessly did what they saw necessary to put an end to the protests), as well as more nuanced conditions
that can only be understood by the Iranians and Egyptians themselves. Also, it is clear that a revolution will not happen if the people who seek change merely sit in front of their computers and surf the web; Egypt is a perfect example of how a physical presence in the streets can alter an entire system of government, which is something a Tweet or a blog alone cannot accomplish.

As present-day social movements take form and actively challenge the status quo, it is apparent that the new movements are at the same time similar to and different from those of the past. The equivalent basic strategies for revolution have remained the same, but the outlets for communication, dissent, and support have greatly expanded, contributing to the enabling force that is the spread of ideas (Dabashi, 2010). As these forums for discussion become more prevalent in societies around the world, it is possible that the citizens of countries such as Egypt and Iran will increasingly rely on them to assist their efforts in the pursuit of change.

If the medium of social media will continue to be used as a tool to augment revolutionary activities, it is possible, as some have suggested, that the citizens in countries such as Egypt and Iran may develop a stronger desire to adhere to the values of democracy; the Iranians protested because they felt their democracy had been cheapened by election fraud, while the Egyptians grew tired of an oppressive regime and saw the change that a movement “of the people” can accomplish. Because social media is entirely based on peer to peer communication and information-sharing, if oppressive governments are toppled in part due to the increased cooperation among average citizens, this consensus-based approach for change may lead to a desire for a stronger consensus-based approach to government. It is also true that governments that wish to resist the impact of the new era of social media-enabled opposition must make changes, whether they be reformative of current practices or inhibitive of access to social media through censorship, etc.
However, this paper was only meant to examine the prevalence of the use of social media, and from there attempt to add further evidence as to whether the medium had an effect on the revolutions in Egypt and Iran. Because the use of social media in these situations likely quickened the process of organization and unified movement, it would be interesting to look at the role of social media in a psychological context to add weight to the idea that people becoming more willing to act as they learn of increasing numbers of like-minded fellow citizens. Also, it would be useful to gain a wide range of local perspectives regarding social media in the Iranian and Egyptian revolutions (and a knowledge of Arabic and/or Farsi would have been very helpful in accomplishing this), because researching this information from thousands of miles away from the perspective of an entirely different culture may change the way in which information is gathered and analyzed due to pre-conceived opinions and social differences.

The most likely effect of social media on present-day social movements is the speed with which news, ideas, and opinions can be spread, even in the face of government censorship. Thomas Paine could only distribute *Common Sense* to fire up the revolutionaries in America’s early history at a very limited rate; but there is virtually no limit to the speed at which the average citizen can gain a sense of the opinions of the general online community through reading posts on a blog, Facebook, or Twitter, or watching a video uploaded to YouTube. This type of expanded tangible network likely contributed to the development of the revolutions, in that once one knows of others who will also stand up in the fight for change, it becomes much easier for individuals to act. But Tweets and texts alone cannot confront the Basij. Rather than waiting for momentum to build for weeks or months within a society, or for a leader to emerge who can inspire a movement, social media provides the opportunity for people to spend a few minutes on
the internet and determine relatively accurately the number of people who may be inclined to
unite for a common cause.


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