

Twitter on the Barricades: Six Lessons Learned

Written by Noam Cohen



Political revolutions are often closely linked to communication tools. The American Revolution wasn't caused by the proliferation of pamphlets, written to whip colonists into a frenzy against the British. But it sure helped.

Social networking, a distinctly 21st-century phenomenon, has already been credited with aiding protests from the Republic of Georgia to Egypt to Iceland. And Twitter, the newest social-networking tool, has been identified with two mass protests in a matter of months — in Moldova in April and in Iran last week, when hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets to oppose the official results of the presidential election.

But does the label Twitter Revolution, which has been slapped on the two most recent events, oversell the technology? Skeptics note that only a small number of people used Twitter to organize protests in Iran and that other means — individual text messaging, old-fashioned word of mouth and Farsi-language Web sites — were more influential. But Twitter did prove to be a crucial tool in the cat-and-mouse game between the opposition and the government over enlisting world opinion. As the Iranian government restricts journalists' access to events, the protesters have used Twitter's agile communication system to direct the public and journalists alike to video, photographs and written material related to the protests. (As has become established custom on Twitter, users have agreed to mark, or "tag," each of their tweets with the same bit of type — #IranElection — so that users can find them more easily). So maybe there was no Twitter Revolution. But over the last week, we learned a few lessons about the strengths and weaknesses of a technology that is less than three years old and is experiencing explosive growth.

1. Twitter Is a Tool and Thus Difficult to Censor

Twitter aspires to be something different from social-networking sites like Facebook or MySpace: rather than being a vast self-contained world centered on one Web site, Twitter dreams of being a tool that people can use to communicate with each other from a multitude of locations, like e-mail. You do not have to visit the home site to send a message, or tweet. Tweets can originate from text-messaging on a cellphone or even blogging software. Likewise, tweets can be read remotely, whether as text messages or, say, “status updates” on a friend’s Facebook page.

Unlike Facebook, which operates solely as a Web site that can be, in a sense, impounded, shutting down Twitter.com does little to stop the offending Twittering. You’d have to shut down the entire service, which is done occasionally for maintenance.

2. Tweets Are Generally Banal, but Watch Out

“The qualities that make Twitter seem inane and half-baked are what makes it so powerful,” says Jonathan Zittrain, a Harvard law professor who is an expert on the Internet. That is, tweets by their nature seem trivial, with little that is original or menacing. Even Twitter accounts seen as promoting the protest movement in Iran are largely a series of links to photographs hosted

on other sites or brief updates on strategy. Each update may not be important. Collectively, however, the tweets can create a personality or environment that reflects the emotions of the moment and helps drive opinion.

3. Buyer Beware

Nothing on Twitter has been verified. While users can learn from experience to trust a certain Twitter account, it is still a matter of trust. And just as Twitter has helped get out first-hand reports from Tehran, it has also spread inaccurate information, perhaps even disinformation. An article published by the Web site True/Slant highlighted some of the biggest errors on Twitter that were quickly repeated and amplified by bloggers: that three million protested in Tehran last weekend (more like a few hundred thousand); that the opposition candidate Mir Hussein Moussavi was under house arrest (he was being watched); that the president of the election monitoring committee declared the election invalid last Saturday (not so).

4. Watch Your Back

Not only is it hard to be sure that what appears on Twitter is accurate, but some Twitterers may even be trying to trick you. Like Rick's Café, Twitter is thick with discussion of who is really an informant or agent provocateur. One longstanding pro-Moussavi Twitter account, mousavi1388, which has grown to 16,000 followers, recently tweeted, "WARNING: <http://www.mirhoseyn.ir/> & <http://www.mirhoseyn.com/> are fake, DONT join. ... #IranElection11:02 AM Jun 16th from web."

The implication was that government agents had created those accounts to mislead the public. ABCNews.com announced that Twitter users who said they were repeating (“retweeting”) the posts from its reporter, Jim Sciutto, had been fabricating the material to make Mr. Sciutto seem to be backing the government. “I became an unwitting victim,” he wrote.

5. Twitter Is Self-Correcting but a Misleading Gauge

For all the democratic traits of Twitter, not all users are equal. A popular, trusted user matters more and, as shown above, can expose others who are suspected of being fakers. In that way, Twitter is a community, with leaders and cliques. Of course, Twitter is a certain kind of community — technology-loving, generally affluent and Western-tilting. In that way, Twitter is a very poor tool for judging popular sentiment in Iran and trying to assess who won the presidential election. Mr. Ahmadinejad, who presumably has some supporters somewhere in Iran, is losing in a North Korean-style landslide on Twitter.

6. Twitter Can Be a Potent Tool for Media Criticism

Just as Twitter can rally protesters against governments, its broadcast ability can rally them quickly and efficiently against news outlets. One such spontaneous protest was given the tag #CNNfail, using Internet slang to call out CNN last weekend for failing to have comprehensive coverage of the Iranian protests. This was quickly converted to an e-mail writing campaign. CNN was forced to defend its coverage in print and online.

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