The Role of New Media in the 2009 Iranian Elections

SUMMARY

New media technologies played a major role in the events leading up to and following the 2009 Iranian elections and are likely to continue to have a tremendous impact. Social networking tools such as Twitter, Facebook, and blogging have changed the way Iranian citizens communicate with each other as well as with the outside world. From cell phone cameras capturing scenes of violence that otherwise would go unreported to Twitter feeds used to organize massive protests, new media have forever changed the nature of citizen participation, not just in Iran, but throughout the world.

Despite the impact of these technologies during the Iranian elections, relatively little definitive information has been gathered about their specific role in the elections and subsequent protests. What are the implications of these new technologies for democracy in Iran? How have both the opposition and the government used these new tools against each other in what some call an "Internet battlefield"? Do the users of new media adequately represent the Iranian population? How has the Iranian government attempted to censor or curb the use of these new tools? In presentations and

discussions during a panel discussion held by the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), new media practitioners, Iran specialists, and interested observers attempted to clarify the role of new media in the Iranian elections and the implications of these technologies for future democratic movements.

BACKGROUND

On July 7, 2009, CIMA hosted a discussion at the National Endowment for Democracy on the role of new media in the Iranian elections. Approximately 150 media development implementers, new media experts, journalists, representatives of international organizations, and others, came together to discuss the impact of new communications technologies in Iran. The discussion centered on the role of new media in pre- and post-election Iran, as well as the future of new media in social movements.

Presenters included Robert Faris, director of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University; Andrew Lewman, executive director of The Tor Project;

Sam Sedaei, director of the Iran program at Nonviolence International and an international affairs contributor to *The Huffington Post*; and Setareh Derakhshesh, lead anchor for Voice of America's Persian News Network (PNN) and a professor at Georgetown University.

A discussion followed their presentations. This report outlines the presentations and discussion in the order in which they occurred.

PRESENTATIONS

Robert Faris, Director, Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University

Faris told participants:

- In Iran, new media played a significant role in the elections and subsequent protests; however, reliable, international broadcasting services played a more important role.

- New media offer very powerful tools, but these are only tools. While new media technologies offer faster information transfer, they lack the credibility and accuracy of traditional forms of media.

- In many countries, some social media are still very tightly controlled. Because of the centralized nature of tools like YouTube, Facebook, and Flickr, such services are very susceptible to censorship. For example, in Iran, new media tools such as Facebook were used for community organizing prior to and during the election, but after the voting many community organizing sites were blocked by the government.

- Conversely, some social media tools will present a greater challenge to governments seeking to control them. Due to the decentralized nature of tools such as Twitter and SMS, it is difficult for governments to find and control specific sources of information. In addition, it has become increasingly difficult for governments to block such tools without risking a significant public opinion backlash.

- When new media are allowed to flourish they can be used to reduce costs and increase efficiency for social movements. During the Iranian protests, new media helped to unite a supportive community outside of Iran. This community was very effective at using new media to disseminate information about the events in Iran both to outside audiences and to those in Iran.

Andrew Lewman, Executive Director, The Tor Project

Lewman told participants:

- Tor is free software and a network that is used to protect citizens' online privacy and anonymity. Tor accomplishes this by redirecting encrypted traffic through multiple relays located all around the world, making it very difficult for a transmission to be intercepted. Today, there are about half a million users of Tor worldwide.

- Due to Iran's high internet penetration rate (30-40 percent), the Iranian government could not shut down the Internet during the post-elections protests without creating a significant backlash. Nevertheless, the government did block 40-80 percent of Web sites during the protests.

- According to people inside Iran at the time of the protests, citizens most often used Tor to communicate with the outside world and to access various data sharing sites, such as GoogleMaps, to coordinate news, activities, well-being, and general knowledge of the situation.

- During this period, Tor allowed citizens to circumvent the government's restrictions. Tor recorded its highest usage rates in Iran while the Iranian government was blocking the Internet most heavily.

Sam Sedaei, Director, Iran Program, Nonviolence International, and International Affairs Contributor, *The Huffington Post*

Sedaei told participants:

- People have framed the events in Iran as a battle between hardliners and reformers, but the best way to describe the situation is as a public relations struggle. The struggle is between the opposition, which knows how to use technology to get support for their cause, and the government, which is trying the block them from doing so.

- After the results of the election were announced, a public relations war began in Iran as both the government and the opposition tried to spin the events in their favor. The government relied on traditional state-run media to condemn the opposition; however, unlike in the past, the opposition was able to speak out against the government by voicing its own arguments through new media.

- New media played an important role in Iran because, unlike traditional forms of media, they are not a one-way source of information; citizens are able to use new media to both send and receive information. During the protests, citizens used digital cameras and cell phones to capture images and video of the protests, which they then posted on YouTube. Iranians also used Twitter to link to blogs and other web pages with videos and pictures of the protests. Facebook played an important role in garnering support for the protests; opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi's Facebook page alone had thousands of followers.

- International broadcasting services also played an important role in disseminating information about the protests. Satellite TV stations, especially Voice of America's Persian News Network (PNN) and BBC Persian, provided crucial fair and balanced news after the elections.

- The widespread use of new media in Iran during the elections took the government somewhat by surprise, and the regime was forced to go on the defensive. The government

reacted by cutting off all SMS services after the election, taking camera phones away from citizens, removing media equipment from reporters and journalists, and jamming radio and satellite signals.

- Despite widespread censorship, new media have prevented the Iranian government from maintaining a monopoly on mass communication abilities.

Setareh Derakhshesh, lead anchor for Voice of America's Persian News Network (PNN), and professor, Georgetown University

Derakhshesh told participants:

- New media have given new meaning to the word "media." With new media users are able to see events on the other side of the world unfold right before their eyes.

- New media also have changed the course of information. During the Iranian protests, PNN was not only a provider of news but also a receiver of news. Following the election, PNN received almost 300 videos per hour from ordinary people inside of Iran.

- During the protests, one of the biggest challenges faced by PNN was determining whether or not information from new media sources was valid and authentic and whether it should be aired. Iranians occasionally worry that news from the West is propaganda; therefore, PNN had to be very careful in fact-checking new media sources to be

certain they were providing accurate and unbiased information. It was important for PNN not to sacrifice the traditional values of media for speed.

- While PNN used new media during the protests, it also relied on traditional forms of media for information, particularly when the government began censoring it.

- During the protests, the number of PNN followers increased dramatically. Prior to the election, PNN had about 15 million weekly viewers (one in four adults); since the election that number has increased. The PNN Web site also had an 800 percent increase in the number of visitors, and, even with increased censorship, 4,600 followers on its Twitter page.

- Iranians were particularly interested in how they were being perceived by the West, and PNN included coverage of reactions from the U.S. Congress, the White House, and the U.S. Department of State.

- New media in Iran has changed the flow of information in the country. In the future, Iranians will likely rely more on new media, especially if traditional sources continue to be censored.

DISCUSSION

Despite the significant role that new media played in the Iranian elections, participants agreed that the protests should not be defined as a "Twitter Revolution." According to several speakers, Twitter

played an important role in the protests, but it was not a central element. It was used mostly by Iranians living outside the country to spread information about the protests. Participants agreed that international broadcasting services, including PNN and BBC Persian, were more important in getting information to people inside Iran.

Participants also questioned whether new media presented only the opinions of the Iranian urban elite and therefore reflected a disproportionate representation of support for the opposition in Iran. Since new media technologies in Iran are generally concentrated in the hands of the educated, urban elite, participants agreed that it was difficult to say whether these new media are representative of the Iranian public. Nevertheless, one participant pointed out that there were no pro-regime counter protests in the wake of the election, which makes it seem unlikely that there is a large, unrepresented conservative majority in Iran.

When asked how the opposition movement wants to be perceived by the West, several participants agreed that most Iranians do not want to be seen in the same image as their President. Many Iranians believe that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has harmed the country's image, and they want to restore it. According to participants, many Iranians care a great deal about how they are perceived in the United States. With regard to the post-election protests, speakers agreed that many Iranians want support from the West but do not want international intervention. They concurred that the Iranians want any change to come from within.

Several participants also discussed the role of women in the Iranian opposition movement. While their participation is restricted by the framework of the Islamic system, they still played a significant role in the post-election protests in the country. Iranian women are also very active in the blogosphere; however, it is still unclear if online participation organized by women translated into action on the ground.

A number of participants also discussed the role of the Iranian diaspora in the protests. According to participants, the diaspora was very supportive during the protests, and the transfer of information between the diaspora and people inside the country was remarkable. The diaspora played a huge role in translating information coming out of Iran and spreading it to the rest of the world. It also helped people inside Iran stay informed. For example, when YouTube was blocked, people outside Iran e-mailed videos back into the country in order to keep people inside informed of events.

Participants also discussed the strengths and weaknesses of new media in general. A number of participants agreed that mainstream media have benefited from information from new media sources. For example, when traditional media sources were pushed out of Iran, new media users were able to send out reports, pictures, and videos of which traditional media would not otherwise have had access. In addition, new media presents a more democratic platform than traditional media, allowing citizens to talk about what they think is important. However, participants also agreed that new media suffer from a lack of credibility. While new media offer faster access to information than traditional media, the validity and authenticity of such information is often questionable. Additionally, new media must rely on mainstream media in order to have widespread impact; new media users have no control over whether or not their stories are picked up and spread by traditional media outlets.

Participants agreed that in the future the role of new media in Iran will be largely determined by the extent to which the government allows it to flourish. It is unclear how much the Iranian government intends to censor new media, or how well citizens will be able to use new technologies to circumvent government censorship in the future.

Several participants also discussed the role of new media in future social movements. While some governments have become very adept at blocking and censoring new media, doing so is becoming more complicated. In many countries, blocking new media without risking a public opinion backlash has become difficult, participants agreed. In addition, advances in new media technology, such as proxy servers and third party applications, are making it harder for governments to block or censor new media. Consequently, participants agreed, it seems likely that new media will continue to play a role in social movements in the future.

GOING FORWARD

Over the course of the presentations and discussion, broad agreement was reached on several points:

- **New media played an important role in the Iranian elections, but international broadcasting services played equally, if not more, important roles.** New media technologies, including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and cellphones, played an important role in spreading information about the protests in Iran. Despite their widespread use, most of these new media technologies are still very new in Iran, and they did not play a central role in the protests.

Instead, citizens relied greatly on established media sources for information about the protests. International broadcasting services, such as PNN and BCC Persian, played very important roles in providing balanced news coverage during the election and subsequent protests.

- **New media have both strengths and weaknesses.** As compared to traditional media sources, new media offer a variety of advantages. New media have proven more difficult for governments to censor than traditional forms of media. When traditional media sources were pushed out of Iran, new media users were still able to send out reports, pictures, and videos that mainstream media would not otherwise have had access to. In addition, new media present a more democratic platform than traditional media. While mainstream media have a tendency to focus on only one story at a time, new media allow citizens to talk about what they think is important.

Nevertheless, new media outlets are not without flaws. New media can lack credibility. While new media offer faster access to information than traditional forms of media, the validity and authenticity of such information is often questionable. Additionally, new media must rely on mainstream media in order to have widespread impact.

- **New media are not immune to censorship.** In many countries, social media are still very tightly controlled. Because of their centralized nature, some social

media sites are very susceptible to censorship—a government can shut down an entire social network in a single stroke. Even so, governments that seek to control social media are having a more difficult time doing so. Many new media tools have made it difficult to find and control sources of information. In addition, in many countries it has become difficult to block new media without risking a grave public opinion backlash. Advances in new media technologies are also making it harder for governments to block or censor some new media.

- **New media will continue to play a role in social movements in the future.** The role of new media in future social movements will be largely determined by the extent to which governments allow new media to exist in their societies. It is unclear to what extent many authoritarian regimes plan to censor new media in the future, or how successful citizens will be at circumventing such censorship. While some governments have become very adept at blocking and censoring new media, it is becoming more complicated to do so. Consequently, it seems likely that new media will continue to play a role in democratic movements in the future.

Summary by: Laura Mottaz
CIMA Staff

The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), an initiative of the National Endowment for Democracy, works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of media assistance programs by providing information, building networks, conducting research, and highlighting the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies around the world. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

Marguerite H. Sullivan
Senior Director

CIMA Advisory Council