TWITTER FREE IRAN: AN EVALUATION OF TWITTER'S ROLE IN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND INFORMATION OPERATIONS IN IRAN'S 2009 ELECTION CRISIS

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Abstract

Social media platforms such as Twitter pose new challenges for decision-makers in an international crisis. We examine Twitter's role during Iran's 2009 election crisis using a comparative analysis of Twitter investors, US State Department diplomats, citizen activists and Iranian protestors and paramilitary forces. We code for key events during the election's aftermath from 12 June to 5 August 2009, and evaluate Twitter. Foreign policy, international political economy and historical sociology frameworks provide a deeper context of how Twitter was used by different users for defensive information operations and public diplomacy. Those who believe Twitter and other social network technologies will enable ordinary people to seize power from repressive regimes should consider the fate of Iran's protestors, some of whom paid for their enthusiastic adoption of Twitter with their lives.

Keywords

Twitter, foreign policy, international relations, United States, Iran, social networks

1. Research problem, study context and methods

> The next U.S. administration may well face an Iran again in turmoil. If so, we will be fortunate in not having an embassy in Tehran to worry about. From a safe distance, we can watch the Iranian people, again, fight for their freedom. We can pray that the clerical *Gotterdamerung* isn't too bloody, and that the mullahs quickly retreat to their mosques and content themselves primarily with the joys of scholarly disputation. (Reuel Marc Gerecht, Fellow, American Enterprise Institute (Gerecht 2000: 144))

1.1 Study context: Twitter and Iran's 2009 election crisis

Twitter was developed in 2006 as a company side-project using the Ruby on Rails programming language. As a social media or 'micro-blogging' platform, it allows users to post short messages of no more than 140 characters in length, which are often used for status updates, news comments, and to 'retweet' or repost the messages of other users. As it evolved, Twitter created an 'ambient intimacy' which differed from other social media platforms. It focussed on news and real-time events, provided 'hashtags' (user-generated coding for searchable terms), and was rapidly integrated into live events (O'Reilly and Milstein 2009: 9, 11, 13, 41, 73, 113, 153, 193). Third-party software enabled Twitter to be integrated into other devices, such as Apple's iPhone. Twitter has experienced explosive early growth: according to one estimate, 'unique visitors grew 1382 percent from February 2008 to February 2009' (O'Reilly and Milstein 2009: 5).

On 16 June 2009, Reuters and other global media outlets reported that the US State Department had asked Twitter to delay a scheduled server upgrade, ostensibly in order to ensure Iranian users maximum access to the service (Pleming 2009). US diplomats and other public officials were monitoring Twitter use originating from Iran, and were using this 'chatter' on Iran's domestic political situation as an important source of public source intelligence.

In June 2009, Iran's domestic politics erupted into street protests and civil disobedience in the capital Tehran. The catalyst was incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory in the 12 June election against opposition candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi. Twitter's users had mobilised to comment about Iran's electoral uncertainty and political future (McElroy 2009). It was in this context that the US State Department made its request, confirmed during a daily briefing with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (Clinton 2009), who also praised the State Department's decision in February 2009 to launch an official Twitter page to communicate its views to international audiences, viewable at www.twitter.com/dipnote (Kelly 2009; DipNote Bloggers 2009; Anonymous 2009).

Was this a watershed moment for social media? It was the first time that a US government agency explicitly acknowledged the potential role of social media platforms in an international event (LaVallee 2009; Musgrove 2009). Some Twitter users argued that traditional media outlets such as CNN had done a poor job of reporting the Iranian election of 12 June and the subsequent Tehran street protests. They designated a Twitter 'hashtag' — or keyword search term — as '#CNNfail', an explicit criticism of CNN and an implicit attempt by at least some users to de-legitimise an 'old media' rival (Cashmore 2009; Poniewozik 2009). Twitter's chief executive officer, Biz Stone, felt differently, and a day later distanced his company from the State Department's request (Shiels 2009). Meanwhile, in Iran, the Ayatollah Ali Khameini, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic under the Iranian constitution, attacked the influence of 'deviant web sites' such as Twitter on Iranian domestic affairs (Schachtman 2009). The consensus amongst journalists at *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Businessweek* and *Time* was that Twitter represented a new and influential medium for social movements and international politics (Ante 2009; Forte 2009; Grossman 2009; Landler and Stelter 2009).

In this paper, we seek to understand the context of the US State Department's request, to discern its deeper rationale, and to evaluate how effective Twitter was during Iran's 2009 election protests. In order to do this, we synthesise conceptual frameworks in foreign policy, strategic studies and comparative, 'event studies' methods from historical sociology. By examining how different actors — such as the State Department, the Iranian Government, Twitter users, Iranian paramilitaries, and other non-state actors — may have used Twitter as a means to advance their various aims and ends, we call into question the effectiveness of Twitter as a tool for public diplomacy and social mobilisation. Finally, we ask whether the Twitter campaigns in Iran may have had the unintended consequence of aiding the ensuing violent repression of Iranian protestors by Ahmadinejad and Khatami's regime.

1.2 Decision contexts: US, Iranian and international politics

Twitter's role in Iran's 2009 election occurred in a decision context shaped by troubled US-Iranian relations and international politics. Iran's 'unthinkable' 1979 Revolution, the 444-day hostage crisis, and the USS *Vincennes* shotdown of Iran Air 655 were deeply influential events amongst US policymakers (Bowden 2006; Kurzman 2004; Hodlin 2000). These events led to a 'spiral mode of engagement and confrontation' between successive Iranian and US governments (Jervis 1997: 174). Compounding this, Iran's domestic politics lies outside the Lockean political universe which has shaped US foreign policy thinking, which became evident during the 2002 Millennium Wargame when Lieutenant General Paul K. Van Riper playing as Iran, defeated US military forces (Treverton 2009: 19–20; Pollack 2005; Herman, Frost and Kurz 2009; Takeyh 2007). This incommensurability lies at the heart of why a social media solution may have appealed to US State Department policymakers.

In its 2006 National Security Statement, George W. Bush's administration designated Iran as a 'tyrannous' regime, and a major international concern due to its covert program to acquire nuclear weapons (Bush 2006; Silverstone 2007: 194–195; Gray 2009: 237; Deibel 2007: 115, 145, 386). Bush's stance undermined the position of Iranian moderate Mohamed Khatami domestically, and helped create the environment which enabled the conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to become Iran's elected president. Ahmadinejad manipulated rumours of an impending attack by the US or Israeli on Iran, and strengthened the Basij paramilitaries who would affect the 2009 election outcome (Hersh 2006). In doing so, Ahmadinejad and others were influenced by an Iranian domestic tradition of defensive information operations. For instance, the Ayatollah Khomeini's audio-taped sermons, recorded in exile, were an important factor in the lead-up to the 1979 Revolution. Other examples include the use of Friday religious sermons to mobilise the population, anti-Barbie doll campaigns, and Iran's Al-Alam satellite television network (Jafarzadeh 2007: 33, 104–105; Barnett 2004: 125–126).

In the US, 'neoconservatives' in George W. Bush's administration such as Richard Perle, Robert Kagan and William Kristol understood the role of defensive information, and, in keeping with their previously stated goals of a 'new American century', sought to reshape various US foreign policy institutions and levers once in power (Kagan and Kristol 2000b). Their models were Samuel Huntington's model of democratic pathways and the Reagan administration's support of pro-democracy movements for peaceful regime change, such as Poland's Solidarity movement (Huntington 1968). In the context of the Bush administration, they advocated 'regime change' in countries perceived to be US enemies, such as Syria, Iraq, Iran, Burma and North Korea, in a program often framed in terms of replacing tyranny with Lockean political freedom (Jafarzadeh 2007: 230). They therefore championed reforms in the US State Department such as a streamlined bureau system to deal with Iran's defensive operations (Frum and Perle 2004: 194–195). These goals progressed after the 2003 Iraq War began, despite revelations on the politicisation of intelligence about Iraq's covert nuclear weapons program (National Intelligence Council 2002). Thomas P.M. Barnett claimed in 2004 that a 'Big Bang' would be required to target Iran's 'sullen majority', which he argued 'has already given up trying to create any future in that country' (Barnett 2004: 289). Although not a neoconservative, Barnett was also bullish about the prospects of Iran's domestic reformists: 'the counterrevolution has already begun,' he wrote, 'and it will continue to flare up periodically until some trigger sets off the big explosion.' (Barnett 2004: 380).

This historical background is important because it describes the decision context relevant to Twitter's role in Iran's 2009 election crisis. It suggests that Bush administration neoconservatives had searched for ways to initiate peaceful 'regime change' in Iran, for instance by mobilising Barnett's 'sullen majority', and that the US State Department might play a role. This is why they perceived the new Obama administration to be on a 'policy pause' during the crisis (Wolfowitz 2009). Iran's government in turn reacted to US diplomatic pressure by conducting its own defensive information operations and by strengthening its paramilitary forces. As Robert Jervis foresaw, this 'spiral mode of engagement and confrontation' would play out in US-Iranian relations, this time in the arena of social media platforms.

1.3 Study frameworks and methodologies

This study focuses on Iran's elections in June 2009, notably the period of political uncertainty between 15 June and 5 August, in which a range of actors tried to influence the election outcome. We use different conceptual perspectives as organising frameworks to integrate several levels and units of analysis, notably the macro level of foreign policy and regime change with actors' beliefs, decisions, and chosen policy instruments. Through these conceptual perspectives, we draw tentative conclusions, and synthesise a qualitative matrix of descriptions, summarised below.

Firstly, we employ Charles Tilly's 'event studies' ideas in historical sociology. Tilly was interested in how regime change or revolution involves challenge to the values and myths of a society: its social structures, its institutions, and its elite leadership or class composition (Conteh-Morgan 2004:

158). According to Tilly, a successful revolution requires three conditions: a 'disequilibrated' or destabilised system, a decision to change the regime's structure or to maintain the status quo, and either moral or military force (Conteh-Morgan 2004: 15, 163; Ackerman and DuVall 2001). For Tilly, 'violent action is purposeful … a tactical choice of groups in their political struggles against those who monopolise influence, access, and resources' (Conteh-Morgan 2004: 15).

Another way of looking at the subject is by way of Graham Allison's idea of 'perspectivism', which he developed in an influential study of the 1962 Cuban Missile crisis (Allison and Zelikow 1999). Allison's 'perspectivism' uses competing explanatory and conceptual frameworks to identify the relevant causal factors in decision-making, informed by the May Group of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, Allison's mentor Richard Neustadt, and the influence at the time of Thomas Kuhn's 'paradigms' as a philosophy of science (Kuklick 2006: 110, 166; Neustadt and May 1986).

In addition to Tilly's thoughts on political stability and Allison's concept of 'perspectivism', we employ two other frameworks from the foreign policy and international relations literature: Terry Deibel's (2007) appreciation of statecraft and foreign policy levers, and Joseph Nye's concept of 'soft power'. Deibel suggests leaders can influence other decision-makers and foreign audiences through various 'levers', which can be political, economic, military, or informational instruments. Nye defines 'soft power' most concisely as 'attractive power' which 'rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others' (Nye 2004: 5). Soft power dove-tails with Deibel's framework, as soft power relies on foreign policy levers like cultural affinity or informational access.

Table 1: Conceptual theorists

Theorist	Level of Analysis	Variables
Graham Allison	Macro: perspectivalism Micro: beliefs and decisions	Perspectives, Beliefs, Decisions
Terry Deibel	Macro: foreign policy Micro: decisions and policy instruments	Foreign Policy, Policy Instruments, Beliefs, Decisions
Joseph S. Nye, Jr.	Micro: policy instruments	Soft Power
Charles Tilly	Macro: regimes Micro: actors, decisions, and collective violence	Regimes, Actors, Beliefs, Decisions, Collective Violence

Source: Conceptual theorists referred to in this paper, summarised from Allison and Zelezikow 2009; Deibel 2007; Nye, Jr. 2004; Tilly 2003 and Tilly 2006.

1.4 Study and methodology limitations

Our study does not have access to key primary data such as the US State Department's internal deliberations, the level or nature of Twitter's compliance about the US State Department's request, and primary sources from Iran's security agencies. New information will likely become available in the future, such as archival sources that record this primary data, which may generate new studies with more reliably informed conclusions. For instance, quasi-experimental research methodologies that use Twitter's message stream during an event, together with Tilly's coding framework, are now possible.

Twitter also currently lacks the sophistication of NYSE/Euronext, Bloomberg and Thomson Reuters to provide real-time data. Twitter may develop or co-integrate these capabilities, such as to survey foreign policy experts in real-time. This will interest two audiences: journalists and diplomats who monitor social media platforms, and analysts who engage in defensive and strategic information operations. Our study tentatively suggests that this may already be the case, and that journalists and new media practitioners need to update their conceptual knowledge of these fields. Therefore, our conclusions are by their nature provisional and qualitative.

2: Comparative analysis of the 2009 Iranian election crisis

2.1 Charles Tilly's coding for Iran, rumour vectors and pre-election forecasts

Tilly's historical sociology provides the coding framework for our comparative analysis: the nature of the political regime within a nation-state, the range of different strategic actors in events, and the interactive dynamics and types of violence which these actors use as strategic means to pursue goals (Tilly 2003: 29; Tilly 2006). Tilly describes Iran as a 'high capacity non-democratic' state, whose regimes have a history of targeting political actors like protestors — perhaps unsurprisingly, given that a mass protest movement was critical in bringing down the Shah in 1979. Tilly identifies strategic actors including: Iran's Revolutionary Council as the polity; the pro-democracy protestors as challengers; ordinary citizens in the broader Iranian population; outside political actors such as the US State Department; risk arbitrageurs and financial market speculators in commodities, energy and oil; and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard security forces and the Basij paramilitaries as 'violence specialists' who 'follow dynamics of their own' (Tilly 2003: 40). Different actors will use the same technology for different ends.

A review of the 12 June to 5 August time period highlights the critical role that the Basij played in containing the mass protests which had gained international media attention. The election protests fit Tilly's criterion of a 'violent ritual': the protestors engaged in 'scattered attacks' against Iranian infrastructure, while the Basij used 'brawls', 'opportunism' and 'individual aggression' against the mass protests. Iran's foreign diaspora framed the Revolutionary Guard and Basij violence against the street protestors as 'coordinated destruction' — in other words, concerted repressive political violence.

In trying to overcome the US-Iranian culture gap, analysts must evaluate highly contextualised information that often originates from unverified or subjective sources (Treverton 2009: 31). For example, rumours are unverified bits of information which have a strong emotional fit with our beliefs and prejudices, and which can shape our perceptions (Schindler 2007: 6–7). Since 'the reporting and data is dated' on Iran (Sadjapour 2007), is Twitter vulnerable to rumours? Potentially, many of the media stories about Iran are at least partly based on rumours: for example, *Observer* reporter Robert Fisk's story on a letter which 'proved' Mousavi had won the election over Ahmadinejad (Fisk 2009), or claims that Ahmadinejad's anti-Semitism was due to his Jewish roots (Javadenfar 2009). Finally, political forecasters can make errors: game theorist Bruce Bueno de Mesquita's *TED* presentation prior to Iran's election argues that the mullahs would lose power by 2010 (Bueno de Mesquita 2009). This prediction looks likely to be proved wrong.

2.2 Did Twitter benefit from Iran's 2009 election?

In the past two decades, emerging media platforms that figure in world historical affairs have often won high praise from journalists, pundits and financial market analysts. For instance, the high-profile reporting of the 1991 Gulf War produced by the Cable News Network (CNN) helped the network gain widespread international credibility (Kellner 1992) — a term was even coined to describe the network's influence, the so-called 'CNN Effect' — and spurred a great deal of analysis and research in the fields of philosophy, communications and political science (Baudrillard 1995, Entman 2004). In military and strategic studies, this was also a period in which the Revolution in Military Affairs was promoted by 'prophet-advocates' and the 'traditional bevy of over-excited theorists' who argued that 'rapid development in consumer electronics and [the] Internet' would transform international relations and the ways that wars are fought (Gray 2005: 105–128, 151–153, 314, 319; Rid 2007: 89). The 'CNN Effect' and the Revolution in Military Affairs may have peaked with the US 'shock and awe' campaign in Baghdad, Iraq, during March 2003.

Twitter gained a similar public visibility in 2009, with events such as the Hudson River plane landing, California's forest fires and the Los Angeles earthquake (O'Reilly and Milstein 2009: 13). Commentators and media analysts argued that Twitter was able to 'break' news stories in real-time

through self-organising social networks, providing more timely information than traditional print and electronic media were capable of producing. This capability interested financial speculators and hedge funds, who used Twitter for market intelligence, and speculated about how events like Iran's missile test on 9 July 2008 would influence global oil, energy and commodities markets, a 'context of use' already evident during the 1991 Gulf War (Pritchett and Palmer 2009; Van Dam 2009; Busch 2007; Jankovsky 2008).

Just before Iran's election, Twitter 'crossed the chasm' (Moore 2006) from early adopters to a mainstream audience: it had built a critical mass of user volume, was adopted by many journalists and news media organisations, gained celebrity Twitter users, and was used as a 'real-time comment' tool for live broadcasts. This growth fuelled acquisition rumours that Twitter's market niche of real-time status updates would allow it to outpace other social networking platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn, which focussed on friendship groups, photo-sharing, family messaging, and job seeker profiles.

How did Iran's election protests benefit Twitter? The hashtag '#IranElection' was still a major keyword on Twitter's front-page in September 2009. For at least the time-period 12 June to 5 August 2009, the events drove Twitter's visibility higher than competing platforms. Twitter's chief executive officer Biz Stone also benefited, albeit indirectly. In February 2009, he raised US$35 million in Stage C financing. In September 2009, Stone negotiated a further US$100 million financing from six venture capital firms that specialised in disruptive strategies for emerging and new markets. The various deals implied a market value for Twitter of approximately US$1 billion. Stone's motivations were likely related to the cash-flow demands of the business, in the context of certain 'inflection points' in accessing venture capital funding (DFJ Gotham Ventures 2009).

2.3 'Citizen activists': What role did Twitter users play and how effective was it?

After Iran's election result was announced on 12 June 2009, US and Iranian activists turned to social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to protest. Twitter's surge in users meant that the network was available to significant numbers of people for the first time, allowing these users to mobilise the social media platform to attempt to influence international events. This appeared to confirm one of the theses of the Revolution in Military Affairs: that activist movements would tap the internet for global reach (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001). Twitter users may also have looked to the so-called Colour Revolutions in Georgia (2003), the Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005) as models, as well as the SMS-mediated protests against Carlos Estrada in The Philippines in January 2001 (Rafael 2003). Iran's election crisis was subsequently dubbed the Green Revolution to highlight this conceptual continuity, and in reference to the Green reformist movement of Mousavi and others.

Many prominent Twitter users believed Iran's demographics made regime change inevitable. Commentator and author Christopher Hitchens observed that between 50–70% of Iran's population is under 30, and that this is due to the Ayatollah Khameini's policies after the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War (Hitchens 2009; Berson 2009). More informed Iranian observers contend that despite these demographics, they are not destiny, and that Iran's macroeconomic stability is an equally important factor (Sadjadpour 2007).

Topify.com's Arik Fraimovich created the prominent campaign Help Iran Election, which asked Twitter users to alter their profile photos with a green tint. Other Twitter users signalled their support by changing their account time-zone to Tehran, posting links and 'retweets' from other users, and attempting to coordinate a social network protest. Within two weeks, Fraimovich's 'citizen activist' campaign gathered 160,000 users and attracted the attention of high-profile US social media activists and foreign policy analysts (Lebkowsky 2009; Quirk 2009).

Fraimovich's campaign galvanised Twitter users during 14–28 June 2009 — an uncertain period of street protests, speculation about the recount outcome, and the possibility that opposition candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi might actively contest for power. But whilst it was the most prominent, other

Internet-based campaigns tried different strategies. The campaign and website Sea of Green lobbied the prominent volunteer organisation United Way to become involved. Sympathetic hackers targeted Iranian web servers with 'denial of service' attacks. Initiatives such as Anonymous Iran and Haystack tried to sidestep the Iranian government's internet filters that censored international news coverage.

If Iran was experiencing a revolutionary wave, would social media mobilisation support Mousavi's reformist movement, the Green Path of Hope? The pro-democracy protesters, Tilly's 'challengers', appeared to fit Nostafa Rejai and Kay Phillips' classification of revolutionary leaders as urban, middle class, well educated, and motivated by ideals of justice, nationalism and patriotism (Conteh-Morgan 2004: 143; Dreyfuss 2009). This demographic profile may overlap with social media access and use, although data regarding Iranian online media use is patchy. The protests gained a broader, sympathetic audience after a young protestor, Neda Agha-Soltan, was shot dead on 20 June 2009, an event filmed by a bystander and posted to the video-sharing site YouTube. Iranian police and media responded to the massive viral popularity of the YouTube video by contending that Agha-Soltan's death had been staged by foreign agencies for propaganda purposes (PBS *Frontline* 2009).

Faimovich and others were unable to halt further protests or to change the election results. Ayatollah Ali Khameini confirmed Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's second presidential term on 3 August and he was inaugurated on 5 August. By then, protests had already been triggered in Paris on 29 June 2009, and a second wave of rumours propagated in Twitter 'retweets' promised that Iran's elite would split over Khameini's decision. Mousivi's official webpage was then taken offline, and he moved to Facebook.

Disturbingly, social media also became a vector for state repression. Iran's Revolutionary Guard and the paramilitary Basij used Twitter to hunt down and target Iranian pro-democracy activists, a pattern in earlier unsuccessful revolutions (Morozov 2009; Deibert and Stein 2003). It has been speculated that the Revolutionary Guards knew from past protests that students would become de-politicised if they saw that the election process was manipulable (Sadjadpour 2007).

2.4 'Hearts and minds': Why did the US State Department intervene with Twitter?

Because they are inherently difficult to define, 'soft power' foreign policy levers are often misunderstood. Indeed, during the Bush administration, they were the focus of intense debate amongst strategists. For neoconservatives David Frum and Richard Perle, the demise of the Bush administration's Coalition Information Centre (CIC) and the emergence of Al Jazeera meant that US 'public diplomacy 'has reverted to its accustomed (low) place in the scheme of things' (Frum and Perle 2004: 127), and that the US lacked statecraft experience with the coercive diplomacy needed to deal with Iran, Syria and North Korea (Lennon 2003: 15).

In contrast, the Pentagon and the US State Department gained operational experience throughout the 1990s in strategic information warfare and strategic public affairs (Rid 2007: 178–179' Latham 2003a; Latham 2003b). These policy levers are used for media management, to deter enemies, and to support international coalitions (Smith 2008). Information warfare techniques became popular in the doctrinal climate of the Revolution in Military Affairs as a means to target and disrupt a country's critical national infrastructure (Gray 2005: 319, 326). Although much media discussion has focussed on embedded journalists, these are in fact broader frameworks which became more prominent in politico-military planning after the September 11 attacks (Rid 2007: 121–122, 125).

On the surface, the US State Department appeared to intervene with Twitter to prevent a 'Fail Whale' or server downtime during the protests (O'Reilly and Milstein 2009: 53). But this paper contends there were deeper reasons, which become clearer when the historical record is considered.

Public diplomacy, or 'carefully targeted sectors of foreign publics in order to develop support' was the State Department's most plausible reason for approaching Twitter during Iran's election (Ross 2003: 252; Deibel 2007: 236; Andoni 2003; Blinken 2003). In doing so, State Department diplomats

found a way to answer the Bush administration's neoconservatives, who wanted to upscale their support and provide communications equipment for Iranian protestors (Frum and Perle 2004: 94–95). Echoing Nye, and in what Terry Deibel later dubbed the 'Demonstration Effect', David Frum and Richard Perle argued that 'demonstration means opening political spaces in which Middle Eastern people can express concrete grievances in ways that bring action to improve their lives' (Deibel 2007 2004: Frum and Perle 2004: 138). Twitter provided the communications equipment to mobilise and monitor Iranian protesters, and to harness the Demonstration effect in the election's aftermath. Just as the CNN Effect had influenced the 1991 Gulf War, the Twitter Effect and the Demonstration Effect may have been the catalyst to realise the neoconservative goal: peaceful 'regime change' in Iran.

How plausible is this tentative hypothesis, in the absence of verified primary sources? For a decade before the protests, the US had targeted Iran's satellite television networks (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001; Kaufman 2003: 310; Sadjapour 2007). The Iranian diaspora also funded Farsi-language US satellite broadcasts from Los Angeles into Iran, which triggered 'mass demonstrations in Tehran' and 'videos that attract Iranian teenagers [and] offend Iranian mullahs' (Nye 2004: 52). Robert Kagan and William Kristol believed that Iran's protests in July 1999 were a 'foretaste' of its future (Kagan and Kristol 2000a: 124). Twitter therefore represented a potential new mechanism to implement US foreign policy.

High-profile Twitter campaigns also meant the State Department could monitor the 'chatter' whilst maintaining the necessary plausible deniability. In the language of John Boyd's influential military model of real-time decision-making, they could observe and orient their foreign policy levers, before deciding to act (Richards 2007). In doing so, they avoided the problems which the Clinton administration faced when its 'Radio Free Iran' channel — which the Iranian diaspora dubbed 'Radio Free Liberty' — was portrayed by *The New York Times* as propaganda rather than public diplomacy (Silverstone 2007: 112; Rid 2007: 119–120). The State Department wanted to avoid a repeat of its publicly discredited 'Radio Free Liberty' and Radio Farda broadcasts into Iran, and neoconservative allegations that it was caught in a domestic turf war with the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Council (Kagan and Kristol 2000: 112–113, 143; Deibel 2007: 241).

However, 'Radio Free Twitter' did not live up to the benchmark of the Cold War's Radio Free Europe campaigns for public diplomacy and strategic public affairs (Seib 2004: 129, 131–134; Treverton 2009: 221). This failure is the deeper reason why the 'Twitter Revolution' was premature (Mishra 2009). As events showed, neither the Twitter campaigns nor the public demonstrations were able to change Iran's election outcome.

Table 2: Sample of protest events in Iran's 2009 election, by Charles Tilly's coding categories

Date	Event	Tilly category
13–15 June 2009	Tehran street protests	Violent Ritual
17 June 2009	Iranian football team wears green	Opportunism
18 June 2009	Central Tehran protests	Non-violent protest; Brawls; Scattered Attacks
20 June 2009	IRINN report of death near Khomeini's mausoleum	Opportunism; Scattered Attacks
20 June 2009	Basij shoot Neda Soltan	Individual Aggression; Opportunism

Source: Protest events in Iran's 2009 election, categorised with reference to Charles Tilly's theories of regime repertoires and resource mobilisation (Tilly 2006; Tilly 2003)

3. Evaluating Twitter

3.1 Evaluating Twitter

A common conceptual underpinning of the pro-Twitter ideas of public diplomacy and new media boosterism discussed above are social contagion models from social psychology and behavioural finance (Chamley 2003). However, they differed in their goals, means and ends. Twitter users mobilised to support Iran's protestors and to share their communitarian ideals, but their campaigns could not deal directly with Iran's Basij paramilitaries.

The US State Department may have believed Twitter's potential for coalition building and coordination had the potential to improve Iran's domestic balance of power. Alternatively, it may have monitored Twitter as a quasi-experimental test of social media's potential for self-reinforcing information operations, based on Twitter users' rumour vectors. Whilst this may sound implausible, The State Department was already interested in new technology platforms to conduct effective information operations — public opinion research, rapid response, a new media outlet, and that would allow self-organisation — which Twitter closely fits (Kaufman 2003: 289–293). Another interpretation was that the US State Department's request for Twitter to support Iran's pro-democracy protestors may have been an attempt, like the Radio Free broadcasts, to keep open the opportunities for Iranian dissent in the hope of peaceful regime change, and during the time-window of the uncertain election outcome.

While Twitter users may not have been, State Department analysts and the relevant national security agencies were well aware of the Basij paramilitary and other 'violence specialists' at the disposal of the Iranian regime. This is almost certainly why the US government did not support the pro-democracy protests with small arms transfers to counteract the Basij paramilitaries. Doing so would have required Pentagon, National Security Agency and Central Intelligence Agency assistance to cross the threshold from public diplomacy to covert operations. For several reasons — regime instability and escalation risk, a decision preference for foreign policy levers over military and national intelligence policy levers, and problems in inter-agency coordination — the State Department could not consider this as a realistic policy option.

3.2 Study conclusion

Our study highlights the limitations of 'soft power' and social media technologies for effecting social change. This context is vital to understand the role of Al Jazeera and social media in Iran, and the probability of socio-political change (Minty 2009; Wilson 2009). Critically, those who championed the role of Twitter to spur the anti-regime social movement failed to understand — or worse, ignored — the possibility that Iran's 'violence specialists' in its security apparatus would use Twitter to identify and hunt down pro-democracy protestors. In particular, Iranian Twitter users did not take counter-deception measures to deal with the Basij, who then used Twitter to identify, locate and in some cases kill Iranian protestors.

The societal diffusion of a new technology platform inevitably means that different actors will exploit it for unintended uses, tactical advantages, and 'systematic learning' (Rid 2007: 194; Gray 2009: 38–40, 188; Dolnik 2009: 17). As Colin Gray observes, 'innovation happens, it is countered by emulation, adaption by other cultures, or evasion, there is no final move.' (Gray 2005: 103). Understanding and anticipating these different uses is critical to public diplomacy, and to preventing or limiting such mistakes in future crises.

The 2009 election outcome confirms the status quo in US-Iranian relations: US policymakers were again 'unable to understand Iran on its own terms' (Treverton 2009: 201). Social media may have provided the informational sources to do so, but not the force to counter the Basij's street violence. Meanwhile, those who believe Twitter and other social network technologies will enable ordinary people to seize power from repressive regimes should consider the fate of Iran's protestors, some of whom paid for their enthusiastic adoption of Twitter with their lives.

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