

CASE #07 — Twitter, Technology, Transparency

The western news media has fallen head over heels in love with Twitter, and it is apparent that 2009 was the year in which the romance truly blossomed. Where Twitter had featured in just 62 newspaper headlines in 2008, it rose dramatically to 1448 in 2009. This would double in 2011 to 3308 and, to the end of April 2012, it had featured in 1393 headlines, on course for more than four thousand by year end.¹ So it is then, that the news media fascination with the micro-blogging service that began in 2009 looks very much set to continue. Receiving significant attention, and accounting for some 8% of the Twitter headlines in 2009, were events in two countries both experiencing rising political tensions.

On 6th April 2009 the ruling Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova were returned to government, following elections, in Europe's poorest country, that were marred by "...pressure, intimidation and criminal cases initiated by law enforcement agencies against opposition candidates." (Mikko, 2009) Baroness Emma Nicholson, one of 280 international observers present in Moldova for the elections, observed crowds of men and women along the Transdnistrian border who, having attempted to travel by bus into Moldova to vote, were prevented from doing so were "...video-taped, [had] their papers taken from them and... were warned that they might lose their jobs." (Nicholson, 2009) The following day, protesters occupied the parliament building in Chisinau to demonstrate against what they perceived to be unfair and corrupt electoral practices. Opposition leaders were quick to come out in support of the protests, with the Liberal Democrat leader Vlad Filat declaring the Communist victory a case of "...rude election fraud." (News.bbc.co.uk, 2009) By July, and following repeat elections, the Communists were finally ousted, to be replaced by a fragile coalition of the four major opposition parties that, to this day, is struggling to reform the machinery of government required to prevent Moldova lurching back toward Russia for support. (Smolar, 2012)

Two months later, on 13 June, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was re-elected to a second term as Iranian President. When two-thirds of ballots had been counted, the Iranian electoral commission declared that Mr Ahmadinejad had achieved a clear majority, securing some 63.8% of the vote. The announcement shocked both supporters of opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi and the wider international community, many of whom were hopeful for regime change given the pre-election polling and mood across the nation. Following the close of polls on Friday Mr Mousavi, so confident of victory, had told Al Jazeera that he expected to be "...the winner of this election by a substantial margin." (Aljazeera.com, 2009) The election had marked a high-watermark in Iran in terms of voter turnout, with polling stations extending their opening by two hours to accommodate the huge queues of voters that assembled. The election result was expected to have been much tighter, with both men neck and neck as they approached polling day. The result gave rise to immediate civil unrest as Mousavi's supporters took to the streets in their hundreds of thousands. The regime was ruthless in dealing with the protests, and many civilians were killed or injured.

Both electoral controversies received wide coverage across western news media. Social media featured prominently in reporting, to the point where the events in Moldova and Iran would become known as the 'Twitter Revolutions.' Headlines online and in print, were emphatic: "*Russia Furious with EU Over Twitter Revolution,*" (Independent) "*Students Use Twitter to Storm Presidency in Moldova,*" (The Telegraph) "*The Twitter Crisis: How Site Became Voice of Resistance,*" (The Guardian) "*Twitter Ripped the Veil off 'The Other,'*" (The Sunday Times) "*Twitter on the Barricades in Iran,*" (New York Times) and "*The Tweet that Shook the World*" (Observer) being just a few examples. There was nary a breath of hesitation in ascribing the instrumentality of the social networking platform in the organisation of political unrest in both

these cases. So convincing was the media portrayal that soon enough U.S. State Department officials were requesting re-scheduling of maintenance in order to keep the service online, (Musgrove, 2009) and former national security advisers were doling out their recommendations for a Nobel Peace Prize. (Pfeifle, 2009)

The upshot of this, was that for all the eulogising about Twitter that went on, there was virtually no mention made of the protestors' use of Russian language social media site, Vkontakte, in the reporting of the Moldovan protests and, similarly, little room for discussion of the role played by Balatarin, Donbaleh or Sabzlink by Iranian protestors. Nor, as was noted by journalist Golnaz Esfandiari, did anyone reporting at the time think to stop and ask why it might be that "people trying to coordinate protests in Iran would be writing in any language other than Farsi." Facebook and YouTube received honourable mentions, but nothing like the coverage that was afforded Twitter.ⁱⁱ Sreberny commented that the role of social media had been overplayed and that, in a country where mobile phone ownership was 75% yet there were less than 10,000 (Schectman, 2009) Twitter users, it was hard to "...argue that social media really mobilised Iranians themselves [rather] the protests were best organised using SMS." (Weaver, 2010)

When Malcolm Gladwell's piece, "*Why The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted*," was published in The New Yorker on 4 October 2010 it ignited a fierce debate that raged for months. Gladwell's piece attacked the 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973) inherent to social networks and what he saw as the easy nature of net activism — 'slacktivism' or 'clicktivism', so-called for demanding little more than a click of the mouse as a minimum requirement for participation — and compared this unfavourably with real-world activism as evidenced by the Greensboro student demonstrations, which had sparked a wave of civil rights protests across the United States in the 1960's. Gladwell highlighted what he saw as the inherent weakness of social networks for coordinating and affecting social and political activism: the absence of both structural hierarchy and the clarity of direction that comes from having a designated leadership. In retrospect, it seems as though Gladwell's ire was raised by something of a straw-man: of the many hyperbolic headlines that appeared, most were either wholly or in greater part unrepresentative of the content of the articles to which they were prelude. Few, if indeed any, were those journalists and commentators who argued Twitter as sole cause of the Moldovan or Iranian revolutions, or who failed to recognise the direct action that occurred in the streets of Chisinau or Tehran. As has long been the case: newspapers don't sell themselves.ⁱⁱⁱ

The debate surrounding the Gladwell piece polarised and became something of a face-off between, on one side, techno-utopians desperate to affirm the revolutionary credentials of Twitter, Facebook et al, and on the other, various sceptics lined up to defend Gladwell's interpretation of events; with Rosen and Giroux among the few providing dispassionate and considered commentary amid the furious flurry. Sadly — and somewhat ironically given the varied geography of its subjects and the global implications that these events have had — the debate around Gladwell's provocative article looks, in retrospect, like a particularly western media feeding frenzy. Oddly, Gladwell would eventually revise his position, following the events that would unfold in Tunisia and Egypt through early 2011, and said of the matter: "...my article was written back in the summer well before this happened. I've been as dumbstruck as everybody else by what's happened in the Middle East." (CNN) Twitter featured prominently in

western reports of events in these countries also, and both received frequent mentions throughout the reporting on the events of the 'Arab Spring.'

Objectively establishing the extent to which the new social media platforms influenced and impacted the direction of events across the Middle East in 2009-11 deserves a depth of inquiry beyond the scope of this article, but the type of which is now appearing. The investigations of Danah Boyd and colleagues on the information flows on Twitter during the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings (Lotan and Graeff et al., 2011) are illuminating and, crucially, are based upon the kind of rigorous quantitative analysis that social networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter, with their open APIs and easily accessible gigabytes of data make possible. Similarly, Sreberny and Khiabany have demonstrated that the Iranian blogosphere was a far more nuanced and contested political space than the oversimplified site-of-resistance which was projected by western news media in the immediate aftermath of the election. (Sreberny and Khiabany, 2010) What perhaps is worth considering are those questions less frequently addressed in and around these political uprisings, because there is arguably much more to be gleaned from them than just whether Twitter can or cannot be a useful or effective tool in giving voice to protest.

It was observed at the time that the frequent citation of Twitter, twitterers and their tweets might be explained by the fact that "...the international media [didn't] have its members on the ground." (Schechtman, 2009) It is clear, in the U.K. at least, that there has been a steady decline in the number of foreign correspondents — and subsequently the volume of international reporting — over the past twenty years as we have seen ICTs rise rapidly. (Moore, 2010) This new dependency on social media and non-journalist sources to provide front-line information, in combination with the pressure brought to bear now upon news organisations by the demands of a 24hr news culture, and the relentless churn on Twitter itself, creates a perfect environment for inaccuracies and rumour to be spread without the information being given sufficient interrogation. Of this, Hamid Tehrani, the Persian editor of the blogging network Global Voices, said "...someone tweeted that there were 700,000 people demonstrating in front of a mosque, it turned out that only around 7,000 people showed up." (Weaver, 2010) What are the appropriate methods for news media outlets to establish the veracity of sources in this emerging era of 'citizen journalism', and are we unwittingly moving to an era where primary sources are replaced by secondary sources because they are seen to be both timelier and more economical?

What do the Twitter revolutions tell us about the nexus between old and new media? When protesters were filming footage on mobile phones and uploading it to YouTube and/or Facebook, however many views these clips may have received online, it was still nothing compared to the exposure they received when they were picked up and syndicated across TV news channels. Boyd et al. have demonstrated the persistence and prominence of mainstream media sources in information flows on Twitter during the protests in Tunisia and Egypt, which indicates that their position as an authoritative voice has yet to be usurped by the citizen journalist. (Lotan and Graeff et al, 2011) The intended audience for the, mainly, English language tweets that were coming from in/outside these countries seems unquestionably to have been international media. Old media, in this case, was the amplifying technology.

If we are looking at ICTs and social media platforms as presenting us with new platforms for civic engagement, for political participation, and as tools to facilitate resistance and/or protest, then perhaps their private ownership and for-profit status needs more careful consideration. While Twitter co-founder, Biz Stone, wrote an impassioned rebuttal of Gladwell's article and Twitter complied with the U.S. State Department requests to delay technical updates that would have taken the service offline at a crucial time, would they have otherwise? Their services are used daily, unquestioningly, but what trust is there in these corporations to be impartial and healthily apolitical, and yet, crucially, ethical? Vodafone found itself embroiled in a public relations nightmare after ad agency JWT leaked an ad on their website that the firm had commissioned. Though JWT quickly removed the ad from their site it is still available to view (Dailymotion.com, 2011), and depicts Vodafone claiming credit for the Egyptian revolution. In it, the launch of a previous ad campaign is detailed before the following is flashed up on screen: "3 days later, 100,000 hits and 500,000 fans on Facebook... 3 weeks later, January 25th 2011...", a voiceover then chimes in declaring Mubarak's decision to relinquish the presidency. The ad was widely criticised, including by Google executive and prominent activist, Wael Ghonim, whose comments and likeness were used in the ad without prior authorisation. (Ghonim, 2011) Ironically enough, this followed the firm's prior compliance with government requests to limit mobile services (Telegraph, 2011), and to distribute pro-government SMS to its users. (Wheatley, 2011)

Following the London riots in August 2011, the U.K. government announced that Home Secretary, Theresa May, would be holding meetings with Facebook, Twitter and Research In Motion (RIM, the makers of Blackberry, whose messenger service was at the forefront of reporting during the riots). The Prime Minister, David Cameron, addressed the House of Commons and indicated that there would be a social media clampdown and, potentially, new powers for police and intelligence services. (BBC, 2011) It was widely felt that his reaction was ill informed and ill considered, prompting one journalist to quip that although no mention had been made of Google+ or Linked in relation to the riots that "...perhaps we shouldn't rule anything out." (Bradshaw, 2011) RIM had their website defaced by UK hackers following their perceived rush to assist the police during the riots. (BBC, 2011) Curiously, the firm had been at loggerheads with the Indian government for sometime during 2008, for similar requests for access to user data, about which they finally acquiesced. (Economic Times, 2008)

The openness of platforms like Twitter, that in the first place enable them to be useful to users wishing to quickly and easily reach a wide audience, and the mechanisms it provides for organising comment around a subject are easily misappropriated. The now defunct U.K. furniture retailer, Habitat, was widely criticised for its spamming of the Iranian events on Twitter, having posted such tweets as: "#MOUSAVI Join the database for free to win a £1,000 gift card." (News.bbc.co.uk, 2009) Though the company were swift to apologise, and attributed the tweets to an over-zealous intern, the example highlights the ease with which issues can be hijacked for unethical or nefarious purposes on these social platforms. Flogging furniture is one thing, but what about the potential for deliberate misinformation by regimes seeking to defend themselves?

The episodes of Moldova, Iran and the events of the Arab Spring that followed in early 2011 are rich examples of the disruptive nature of Internet technologies, social networking, and Twitter in particular — even if only in the manner in which it came to frame so much of the discussion around these monumental events, without any clarity about its real impact. Morozov observes that the overbaked claims of the western media may have succeeded only in ensuring that

these digital spaces are now “...watched with more rigor and intensity than anti-government gatherings in physical spaces.” (Morozov, 2011: 235) Additionally, these events have as much to tell us about the shifting relationships between new and old media, the changing role of journalism, and the power exerted by corporates and governments over freedom of expression, as they do about the potential for social networks as enablers for political engagement and action. Once again, they also shine a light on the U.S.’ firm hold over the web: the fact that the U.S. State Department can intervene to keep Twitter up and running in order to influence events in another country should not be overlooked. The myriad questions these events raise in respect of these areas should ensure that the ‘Twitter Revolutions’ are remembered for more in the west than just the fetishistic media frenzy they created.

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ⁱ Results retrieved from NexisUK search of Major World Newspapers (English), excluding newswires and with high similarity articles filtered from results.

ⁱⁱ Admittedly, Twitter has proved harder to prevent access to on a technical level by virtue of it's SMS integration, but Facebook was, for example, used by all presidential candidates in the run-up to Iranian elections.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nor does the Huffington Post homepage click itself, but that's just not anywhere near as snappy now, is it?