Satellite TV and the Iranian Green Movement: The impact of foreign-based Farsi-speaking news channels on the Iranian protests of 2009

Shirin Afkhami[1]

Abstract

In 2009, Iranian people came to the streets in opposition to suspected elections manipulation that led to the victory of the conservative presidential candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad over his reformist challenger Mir Hossein Mousavi. Throughout this wave of protests, the protesters could not rely on Iranian domestic media or the internet. Filtering, censorship and technological manipulation made mass communication very difficult. However, Iranians were left with an alternative option, namely the foreign-based Persian news channels – these had less limitations and easier accessibility. As a result, and contrary to the international view of the protest movement as a "Twitter Revolution," this article argues that the foreign-based channels took advantage of the situation. By offering protesters a more transparent and open platform, they also achieved the strategic goal of trust building with audiences in Iran.

Key Words: Twitter, Green Movement, satellite TV, BBC Persia, VOA Farsi, social movements, censorship, Iran.

Introduction

The ubiquitous presence of the mass media nowadays has turned it into an important tool in shaping public opinion and political movements. The public use the media as a platform to amplify their claims and the media attend to social movements because they create newsworthy events. Todd Gittlin, one of the prominent writers on the relationship between the media and social movements has referred to this relationship as being one of

---

[1] The author is a graduate student of International Relations at Corvinus University of Budapest.

mutual dependency (Viegenhart, 2012: 2). Accordingly, in order to evaluate the amount of impact a certain media organisation can have on a social movement in terms of mobilization and the shaping of public opinion, factors such as accessibility and trustworthiness require attention. While normally people tend to believe a medium with which they share similar political views, this article argues that such mutual dependency requires the presence of both of the aforementioned factors.

The Iranian Green Movement of 2009 is a unique case in this regard for two reasons. Firstly, the movement is internationally dubbed as a "Twitter Revolution,"[2] a term that has been applied to it mostly by those who were following the protests from outside the country. This article aims to challenge this term by claiming that while the crucial role of Twitter in helping people circumvent restrictions on communication throughout demonstrations is undeniable, Twitter has by no means served as a revolutionary tool for the people within Iran. Secondly, although the availability of broadcasting networks in a variety of languages is nothing new, the increasing number of foreign-based Farsi-speaking media organisations, available via satellite TV, and their uncensored coverage turned them into an important actor throughout the Green Movement.

As a result, the article starts out by challenging the term "Twitter Revolution", and why it is not appropriately used for the Iranian protests of 2009. It continues by comparing the effectiveness of Iranian domestic media and the foreign-based channels, concluding that the latter is likely to be the most influential, both in terms of accessibility and trustworthiness.

Social media and the possibility of a Twitter revolution

During the course of the Green Movement, social media played a crucial role in informing people worldwide and in coordinating the public's movements within Iran. Through different social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, many gained access directly to the public-generated contents. However, it did not take long until the Iranian government became sensitive of the extensive use of the internet by opposition supporters. Consequently, the Iranian Ministry of Communication reduced the internet speed to less

---

[2] The term was applied by foreign news agencies such as Washington Post, NY Times, Reuters and many more. Some examples are offered here:
http://blogs.reuters.com/mediafile/2009/06/19/twitter-revolution-in-iran-aided-by-old-media-tv-radio/;
http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/discussion/2009/06/17/DI2009061702232.html   (both accessed on 15 April 2017).

than 128 kilobytes per seconds to make uploading any pictures or videos of street protests impossible (Opennet Report, 2013: 28[3]). This reduction was followed by the filtering of certain websites, including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The high level of limitations and the strict monitoring of the internet by the Iranian government and the Cyber Police decreased the efficiency of the internet in comparison to other types of media that were available at the time. It is important to mention that an unspecified number of people surpassed the regime's control over the internet by using anti-proxies and filter-breakers, but even if one thinks of this number as very high, the very low speed of the internet, specifically for the websites that required fast broadband access, clearly reduced their efficiency.[4]

As a result, it is safe to state that "Twitter revolution" is not a familiar term for those who were in Iran at the time of the outbreak of the 2009 Green Movement. Golnaz Esfandiari, an Iranian journalist, challenged usage of this term by referring to it as a "story that wrote itself." In an article written for *Foreign Policy*, she focuses on the exaggerated role of Twitter during the Green Movement, mostly by Iranian diaspora groups in the US and Europe alongside foreign governments (Esfandiari, 2010). Moreover, many active Twitter users in Iran point out that Twitter, unlike Facebook, is still not a commonly used social media within Iran, let alone the main opposition tool during the 2009 demonstrations. An article in *The Guardian* further pointed out that in solidarity with the Iranian protesters, many Twitter users across the world switched their location to Tehran during the 2009 protests (Weaver, 2010). Hamid Tehrani, the editor of the blogging network *Global Voices* claimed that "The west was focused not on the Iranian people but on the role of western technology. Twitter was important in publicizing what was happening, but its role was overemphasized" (quoted in Weaver, 2010).

By comparing the availability and usage of social media throughout the Iranian Green Movement and the 2013 Turkish Gezi Park protests[5], more light may be shed on the overstated role of Twitter in Iran. It should be noted that the majority of protesters in both countries were urban, educated and belonging to the middle class – the segment of society that would generally provide the highest percentage of internet users in any country.

---

[3] Opennet Initiative (ONI) is a joint project with the goal of monitoring and reporting on internet filtering and surveillance practices by nations.

[4] Due to the sensitive nature of this, there is understandably no data on the exact number of people who had access to anti-filters.

[5] The Gezi protests were famous for the important role of social media in public mobilization.

In 2013, almost 50% of the Turkish population were active users of the internet (Yanatma, 2016). In the same year, according to Semiocast[6] global analysis of social media users, Turkey was ranked #7 in terms of Facebook users and #11 in terms of having the most users of Twitter. Nevertheless, during the Iranian protests, only 10% of the Iranian population had access to internet.[7] Due to filtering, there is no official estimate on the number of Iranians within the country who were either active Facebook or Twitter users – however, in a poll conducted by Iran web in late 2009, respondents claimed that the main social media they use is Facebook and not Twitter.[8] Therefore, a simple analysis of the number of internet users in the two courtiers leads us towards the conclusion that, in contrast with Turkey's experience, Twitter has not been a major contributor to the formation of public protests in Iran.

Mehdi Jami, an Iranian journalist, blogger and filmmaker, claimed in an interview with *Tehran Review* that "whatever the Green Movement has, it owes it to the media" (Mohtadi, 2011). Therefore a question arises in relation to the main media platform of the protesters. As mentioned above, the Iranian government took a number of steps toward tightening its grip on the internet – and yet they proved incapable of preventing the demonstrations. Hence, in the absence of well-functioning internet connectivity and an independent media, how did the Iranian people coordinate several protests? What stood as a platform for the continuity of their demonstrations? In order to answer these questions, the article will examine two distinguished groups of media that were accessible to Iranians at that time: Iranian domestic media and the foreign-based Farsi-speaking satellite television channels.

Iranian domestic media

In Iran, constitutional provisions and laws set restrictions on content that can be offered by the media. Iranian domestic media is generally known for its lack of transparency and the limitations imposed on it by the government. Article 175 of the Iranian constitution guarantees the freedom of expression, as long as it is in line with Islamic criteria and serving the best interests of the country (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran). In other words, the freedom of expression is guaranteed as long as certain red lines are not

---

[6] Semiocast is a market and opinion research company providing social media intelligence consumer insights, social media KPIs and social media solutions.

[7] Percentage provided by Internet Live Stats.

[8] The accuracy of such polls cannot be guaranteed, due to the fact that many people would avoid confirming their usage of any kind of social media in Iran under government's restrictions.

crossed. However, the main issue here is that there is no clear definition for these red lines, and therefore it is very difficult to foresee the threshold of the government's interests.

Starting with newspapers, they routinely face threats of closure by Iranian state authorities. The tough state control has turned the issue of continuity (of being published) into a dominant concern of newspapers. The restricted freedom for journalists and fear of imprisonment also explain the limited coverage offered by newspapers. The low rank of Iran in the Word Press Freedom Index[9] further illustrates the tough conditions in which Iranian newspapers need to function.

The main pillar of the Iranian media, however, is IRIB, or the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting. IRIB is owned by the state and is directly supervised by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, who has the legal authority of appointing and dismissing the head of the IRIB on a periodic basis. Being a huge organization with several national and international television channels broadcasted in 27 languages (IRIB), IRIB is normally controlled by the conservative forces who have their political views directly reflected in IRIB productions. As a result, IRIB has never served as a transparent source of information for many. This statement gained more credibility when a confidential IRIB report was leaked during the 2009 protests. This report criticized the performance of IRIB and regarded its poor performance as a contributing factor to the widespread protests and the eventual engagement of the Iranian public with foreign television channels.

By addressing the IRIB managers, the report summarized the main reasons behind the failure of IRIB to be as such: (1) the creation of doubt among public with the speedy announcement of the results of the presidential election, (2) refusing to offer any airtime to the opposition leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi while celebrating the victory of Ahmadinejad, and (3) failing to cover the public demonstrations that were constantly being covered by international media (IRIB Psychopathology Report, 2009: 3). A noteworthy example here would be the death of Neda Agha-Soltan, an Iranian girl whose sudden death on Tehran's streets became the symbol of the Iranian anti-government protests. Her death, captured on a cellphone camera, went viral in a matter of hours, but Iranian domestic media only briefly discussed her death and later speculated about the fabrication of the video on various occasions (The Death Of Neda, the Other Side of the Coin, 2011).

---

[9] Iran was ranked 172 out of 175 countries of the chart in 2009.

By going back to Gittlin's idea of mutual dependency, it can be concluded that the Iranian protesters and the domestic media have not been mutually dependent on each other. In fact, it can be argued that none of them could serve the other's interests. In a nutshell, the nontransparent information and the lack of proper coverage of the protests discouraged people from solely relying on IRIB to get information about the ongoing political turmoil in the country.

The points mentioned above lead us to conclude that the growing pervasiveness of the Farsi-speaking foreign media outlets during the protests was not exclusively due to the popularity of these channels, but to the decreasing trust of the Iranians in their domestic media. This was an issue the foreign governments were fully aware of, and therefore a significant amount of money was poured into the development of the foreign-based Farsi channels such as BBC and VOA by their host countries (Ash, 2009).

Satellite TV

In Iran, satellite TV has always been banned as part of the resistance against a "cultural onslaught" that was theorized by conservative forces in the 1990s (Azizi, 2014: 30). However, data shows that an estimated 68% of all the Iranian households have had illegal satellite receivers in 2009 (Vengar, 2016: 68), which is 6 times more than the number of internet users. It was therefore not unexpected that with all the limitations imposed on Iranian domestic media, the foreign-based outlets gained pivotal importance for the citizens.

Another point that put these channels one step ahead was the inability of the Iranian government to stand as a serious obstacle to their activities. These channels could neither be shut down nor filtered. The only effective measure that was taken towards them by the Iranian authorities was jamming (Ash, 2009), which these channels circumvented by increasing the number of satellites carrying their signals.

However, it is important to mention that not all of the Farsi speaking channels based outside Iran are included in this analysis. Many of these channels only produce low-budget entertainment programs which normally have a very low viewership. The channels this article concentrates on are the Farsi-speaking services of large broadcasting agencies such as the BBC – funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) of the British government- and the Voice of America – funded by the government of the United States. These have been highly viewed throughout the protests.

According to Rob Beynon, acting manager of BBC foreign correspondents in

London, one in five people who have had access to satellite TV in Iran tuned in to BBC Farsi in the first month of its launch. Moreover, this channel received 300,000 linking blog articles and half a million searches on Google, all in a month following the start of its activity (Burns, 2009). While there is no exact data on the viewership of VOA Farsi, its popularity could be measured by the public reactions to its programs. An example would be *Parazit*, dubbed as the "Iranian Daily Show", which was a satire political show broadcast on Friday nights on VOA Farsi. *Parazit* was regarded by many as the main platform for the young voices of the Green Movement. The show gradually drew global attention and its two hosts appeared on several other networks to discuss Iran and the ongoing conflicts. *Parazit* was estimated to have had millions of viewers in Iran and gathered nearly 1 million likes on Facebook. The influence of the show's anti-Ahmadinejad rhetoric was such that Iranian officials accused the channel of being affiliated with the CIA (Garda, 2011).

These channels offered exactly what Iranian domestic media was not providing for the citizens. They were supporting or highlighting issues that the domestic media did not have the power to raise (Mohtadi, 2011). Phone-in discussion programs provided an opportunity for the Iranian people to communicate internationally and to address the public directly. Programs such as BBC's "Nobate Shoma"[10] is one amongst many. These networks were also actively involved in providing anti-proxies to Iranians via email, to help them circumvent the Iranian censorship infrastructure (Opennet Initiative, 2013). As a result, not only did these channels play a major role in supporting the protesters, but they were occasionally used as a tool for coordinating purposes as well. The younger generation's coordinated practice of chanting "Allaho Akbar" from rooftops at nights is an example of acts that were advertised by Persian media abroad.

In addition, these channels offered close analysis of the political protests across the country. Former political figures appeared on different programs and shared their views on given matters. Many of these people were former political activists whose voice had a direct influence on the protesters. Ahmad Batebi, an Iranian political activist in exile and Abolhassan Banisadr, the first president of the Islamic Republic are examples in this regard.

In return, the contents of these channels and their visuals drew heavily on audience contribution. None of these channels were legally allowed to have a bureau in Iran, and

---

[10] Translated in English as "Your Turn".

other agencies were threatened with having their licenses revoked in case of cooperation with these channels or sharing footage from them. For example, Mohammad Hossein Saffar Harrandi, the Culture Minister of Iran in 2009 claimed that even the BBC's base in Tehran will be confronted if it produces any reports for the Farsi-speaking service (RSF, 2011). This situation led to the rapid growth of citizen journalism under the slogan of "each citizen a medium." In the absence of correspondents on the ground, people acted as the main sources of information for these channels. Despite the interference and journalistic restrictions, the Iranian public played a significant role in by-passing censorship in general (Opennet initiative, 2013: 4). They voluntarily used their cell phones as a tool to film whenever a demonstration took place. In other words, these channels were collecting the news from Iran and broadcasted it back to the country. The Iranian citizens welcomed this two-sided relationship and gladly obliged to promote their own versions of the events in exchange for an open media and advanced technologies.

Accordingly, while the government ban of the satellites makes reaching quantitative data to support the article's main argument difficult, it can be stated that the symbiotic relationship between the protesters in Iran and the Farsi-speaking foreign-based channels was stronger than the one with the domestic media.

Inevitably, these channels were also accused of having a negative impact on the political unrest. Bias, propaganda, and engaging people in "virtual" political activity (i.e. diverting such activity to cyberspace) are some of the issues that these networks were blamed for. Furthermore, many argued that these channels only followed the strategic goals of the states they were funded by, i.e. the United States and the United Kingdom in this case. They were referred to as the West's tools of a psychological warfare and a mouthpiece of world-guzzling capitalism (Voss, 2015: 554). Furthermore, they might have focused on the protests as much as they were to increase their audiences. They were so fixated in promoting the anti-government demonstrations that sometimes they ignored the reasoning, ideology and demands behind the protests. Another criticism referred to the presence of the Iranian diaspora, with its different political standings, in connection to these channels (Lanzillo, 2011).

Consequently, irrespective of the motives of these television channels during the protests, to a certain extent they managed to remove the cloud of suspicion that always existed around foreign media. By offering more transparency, the least they did was to let audiences choose the type of information they were willing to take in, an option that was not provided to them by any other type of mass media at the time.

Conclusion

The Iranian Green Movement provided an opportunity for the Farsi-speaking foreign-based channels to increase their viewership and credibility in Iranian society. Tough state censorship and increased internet restrictions following the protests gave Iranians an incentive to shift more towards Persian channels abroad. However, these channels were not licensed to cover the Iranian demonstrations on the ground, and, therefore, had it not been for citizens' voluntary reporting on the protests, they would not have had much coverage to share. The result of these constraints was the formation of a symbiotic relationship, which made the Iranian public and the foreign media dependent on each other. While these channels never proved to be consistent and committed solely to the mission of the media of informing people, they played a crucial role throughout the protests. It is reasonable to assume that at least some of these channels may have been acting in accordance to whatever framework was provided to them by their host countries, just as it is reasonable to assess that they had considerable impact on the public's mobilization and opinion.

At the time of writing this (Spring 2017), people in Iran trust neither the domestic media, nor the Farsi-speaking channels abroad. However, the viewership of the foreign-based channels has increased and they have managed to achieve greater acceptance within Iran.

Thus, to conclude with, in describing what happened in Iran in the wake of the 2009 presidential elections, the term "Satellite Revolution" should probably be preferred to "Twitter Revolution."

References

"After the Green Movement: Internet Controls in Iran 2009-2012". *Opennet Initiative*, February 2013. at https://opennet.net/blog/2013/02/after-green-movement-internet-controls-iran-2009-2012 (accessed on 20 January 2017).

Ash, Timothy Garton (2009). "New TV Channels and the Green Movement". *Guardian.* 15 January 2009. at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/jan/15/bbc-persian-television-iran (accessed on 20 January 2017).

Azizi, Sharareh (2014). "Democratic Resistance: The Role of Facebook in Iran's Green Movement." *Norwegian University of Life Sciences.* 11 February 2014. At

https://brage.bibsys.no/xmlui/handle/11250/187933 (accessed on 20 January 2017).

Burns, John F (2009). "Persian Station in Britain Rattles Officials in Iran". *New York Times.* 28 June 2009. At http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/29/world/middleeast/29bbc.html (accessed om 20 January 2017).

Esfandiari, Golnaz (2010). "The Twitter Devolution". *Foreign Policy.* 8 June 2010. at http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/06/08/the-twitter-devolution/ (accessed on 20 January 2017).

Garda, Imran (2011). "Parazit: Voice of America of Voice of the People?". *Al Jazeera.* 17 November 2011. Full Video available on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVrGH2H9nys (accessed on 20 January 2017).

"Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran". English Translation available at http://www.iranonline.com/iran/iran-info/government/constitution.html (accessed on 19 April 2017).

"Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting". At www.IRIB.com

"IRIB Psychopathology Report" (2009). *International Campaign of Human Rights in Iran.* 9 August 2009. English Translation available at https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2011/06/irib_confidential/ (accessed on 20 January 2017).

Lanzillo, Amanda (2011). "Iran and the green Movement: Changes in Media and Censorship Capabilities". *Georgetown University.* 2011. At https://changingcommunications.wordpress.com/research/iran-and-the-green-movement/ (accessed on 21 January 2017).

Mohtadi, Ali & Shervin Nekouee (2011). "The Logic of Green Media". *Tehran review.* 8 June 2011. At http://tehranreview.net/articles/9131. (Accessed on 20 January 2017).

"The Death of Neda, The Other Side of the Coin" (2012). *Press TV Production.* 10 October 2012, Available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Shp7HE2YA_c (accessed on 10 November 2016).

Venger, Olesya (2016). "The strategic use of news coverage of the 2009 'Green Movement' in the US and Iranian newspapers as social drama". *Journal of Arab*

and Muslim Media Research. pp 61-79. 1 April 2016. At
http://www.ingentaconnect.com/contentone/intellect/jammr/2016/00000009/000
00001/art00004 (accessed on 20 January 2017).

Vliegenthart, Rens & Stefaan Walgrave (2012). "The Interdependency of Media and
Social Movements". *Antwerp University Publication.* June 2012. AT
http://uahost.uantwerpen.be/m2p/publications/1267102616.pdf (accessed on 20
January 2017).

Voss, Alex (2015). "The inescapable history and politics of Anglo- Iranian relations:
Audience engagement at the BBC Persian Service during the London 2012
Olympics" *Journal of Audience and Reception Studies.* Pp 549-575. May 2015,
Print.

Weaver, Matthiew (2010). "Exaggerated Role of Twitter in the Green Movement".
Guardian. 9 June 2010. At https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/09/iran-
twitter-revolution-protests. (Accessed on 20 January 2017).

Word Press Freedom Index 2009 . At https://rsf.org/en/world-press-freedom-index-2009

Yanatma, Servet (2016). "Social Media and Protests in Turkey". *Reuters institute of
Journalism.* 1 March 2016. At
http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/social-media-and-protests-turkey-
seminar-report (accessed on 20 January 2017).