How the U.S. News Failed in Covering the Iranian Twitter Revolution

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Since going live in 2006, Twitter has changed the way over 500,000,000 users share and receive news. When Iran's presidential election turned sour in 2009, both those in the country and on the other side of the world turned to Twitter for up-to-the-minute coverage without governmental control. However, the lack of accuracy and background information contained in the 140-characters constituting a Tweet gave way to poor journalism practices by creating textual silences and inaccurate framing for the revolution. An analysis of how U.S. news outlets covered the failed Iranian revolution shows the danger of inaccurately covering events due to a lack of historical or cultural background in stories. This is mostly due to the Orienalist outlook that is inherent to American culture, deepened by decades of political and cultural clashes.

The evolving revolution

On June 16, four days after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won the Iranian election, the United States government personally contacted Twitter headquarters asking them to delay an update as it may have interrupted service for those in Iran, showing a huge interest in using this service for foreign policy matters (Morozov 2009). Those who support using social media to access news see this as an excellent tool to monitor what is lacking from most news coverage: those most affected by events.

The Iranian government used Twitter to root out and silence the loudest dissidents using their online information. This made the social media platform a hindrance rather than an advantage to political organization (Burns 2009). Twitter put pressure on the Iranian government to release over 140 prisoners in response to pressure from world leaders who learned of the imprisonments from info coming from

online sources. Twitter is a tool for both monitoring and encouraging change in other countries as it shows the news beyond state-controlled sources. Unfortunately, this also means oppressive regimes can monitor and cease political activists who want change. This type of balance means that Twitter alone is not a tool of social change but rather a new way to express ideas across the world.

Iranian youth were the loudest protesters and therefore often the most heard. However, there was little effort to highlight how this protest pitted the young Westernized Iranians against the older generation founded in Muslim traditions (Effendi 2010). Without this cultural clash showing up in Western news stories, readers were left in the dark how complicated this revolution was. The outcry against government corruption had begun long before in 1997 with the first election of a new leader, who was then ousted by religious governmental bodies, which showed not every Iraqi wanted Western democracy but simply a voice (Effendi 2010). To combat censorship and strict laws that had kept young voices silent for decades, Iranian youth turned toward a growing social media pool.

The Twitter Effect

Twitter usage has grown dramatically since launching as a social media site. The large population coupled with Twitter's ability to organize data trends for people to follow made it a viable source for news. This shift is called the "Twitter Effect," is now seen as the largest change in news consumption since the "CNN Effect" with 24-hour news channels (Richards 2011). The biggest connection between these shifts lies in real-time reporting, except Twitter allows those who are not trained journalists to share their

news with the world. Twitter provides an instant soapbox for anyone with an account to create interest in or criticize news they care about. This gave voices and influence to political actors not seen in past uprisings. The news industry noticed this and many organizations now use Twitter to link people to their important stories of the day. However, there are drawbacks to untrained people creating the news as untrue information may spread.

Twitter created a huge power shift in the news media. Traditional newspapers never had instant access to readership, instead relying on letters to the editor for the community to express any dislike in their coverage (Richards 2011). Now news media outlets face a constant barrage of information from those they once filtered content for: readers. The Twitter hashtag "#CNNfail" began trending on Twitter during the 2009 Iranian uprising in response to the news network's lackluster coverage of the incident (Burns 2009). Traditional journalists value their authority earned through presenting news accurately, while social media focuses on instantly giving readers what they want and challenges the media-fueled hegemony found in time-honored news outlets. These two ideals clash as journalists try to maintain their factual eminence over people Tweeting about world events. Twitter is a version of "ambient journalism" in which it is a mix of facts, feelings and analysis (Hermida 2012). Media sources responded to this shift by creating Twitter accounts in order to reach out to social media users and include citizens in their stories. Although this hints at a change for the way news spreads, it is not without problems. The Twitter Effect has created lead to unverified

material being buried in news facts without necessary background knowledge in complicated stories.

Inaccuracies never checked

The largest source of inaccuracy came from the usage of online mediums to provide news, due to journalists being banned from the country or media outlets being unable to finance reporters on the ground (Morozov 2009). Owing to the lack of access, journalists had to rely on bloggers and Tweeters, which represented the young elites in the country. According to Morozov (2009) "All other biases are present as well: in a country like Iran it's mostly pro-Western, technology-friendly and iPod-carrying young people who are the natural and most frequent users of Twitter." This created an unavoidable reliance on textual silences that did not divulge the generation gap between the sources in articles and the nation of Iran as a whole.

One method to avoid using inaccurate information is to create a news flow relying on incoming sources from a variety of levels. Rather than separating the two, the flow would ensure "News and information is published, disseminated, confirmed or refuted in public through a process facilitated by social services and technologies," (Hermida 2012). The usage of live blogs — where stories continue to grow in front of readers' eyes as the reporter gains more information— is one method of ensuring verification is open to affected readers who may fix any inaccuracies live.

Another method is to have knowledge of the media platforms being used. This will be an important job for a generation of young people who have grown up using social media and are comfortable assessing what a verified account is versus one that

may be creating falsehoods (Richards 2011). However, these dynamic stories also must carry a level of discourse analysis that stories in traditional mediums lack. This means journalists should continue looking for a variety of sources beyond officials with excellent resumes, including exploring social media connections, while balancing the need to provide context for the story. In regards to the failed Iranian Twitter Revolution, perhaps knowledge of the historical standings of social movements in this country would have given the revolution more saliency in global news coverage.

Distances

The primary location of information regarding news plays a pivotal role in how important it is to the reader. Aggregate sites take information from all over the Web and can make issues appear both local and pivotal or distant and unimportant. Readers do not often analyze their own news sources and therefore often believe news from online portals are not aggregated, but created by a secondary source of information (Hyunjin 2011). Any usage of information from these distal sources has a huge impact on what is garnered from proximate sources, regardless of the informational origin. Journalists must be conscious of this when using information from news-aggregating blogs, Twitter feeds or other unverifiable sources because readers will perceive that the facts were gathered by the journalists themselves (Hyunjin 2011). Therefore, it is important to establish precedents for sourcing by being extremely clear where information is coming from. This ensures readers are fully aware of sourcing origins in this dynamic news cycle of covering turbulent events such as the Iranian uprising. News outlets can then

retain their roles as information providers without disregarding the importance of new ways for sources to connect with those looking for info.

The distance readers are from sources also plays a role in what ends up in the U.S. news cycle. There is a huge lack of foreign media reaching U.S. consumers. According to Zuckerman (2012), "Studies of online news consumption show that 95 percent of the news consumed by American Internet users is published in the United States." This news xenophobia carries over into social media as well. Generally, Twitter users only follow those who are close to them based on cultural, language and nationality identifiers (Zuckerman 2012). International issues are filtered through the U.S. news media before hitting readers and therefore carry biases found in American culture. These prejudices are seen in the lack of coverage of religious leaders' prominent roles in the revolution (Naghibi 2011). This distance prevents U.S. readers from reading stories written by those who have different cultural biases to provide.

This may be due to a suspicious attitude toward information coming from sources not American. The U.S. government often distrusts foreign media correspondents much more than those from their own country. This distrust was highlighted in the documentary "Control Room" in which the U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld states Al Jazeera is nothing more than a Middle Eastern propaganda machine. The humorous aspect to this was the multiple interviews with Iraqi government officials who felt American media was supporting their own government's actions. The accusations created a tense relationship between the two parties, which did little to allow information to flow. This situation was never reported on by mainstream

media, who were often too scared of appearing too radical shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001 attack (Streitmatter 2008). Being critical of government is a fundamental job of the press, as dictated by the U.S. founding fathers. However, the media needs to be more aware of the political or cultural undertones within other countries, as well as their own, in order to accurately report on tense situations such as wars.

An inherently Western assumption is that Middle Eastern countries have little desire for revolution due to their long history of being loyal to a sultan, according to the Orientalist argument by social scientist Bernard Lewis (Hazran 2012). This bias is inherent in the cultural norms of Western culture and provides no discourse concerning these biases, meaning there is little room for it in news media from this part of the world. There is also more of an understanding of historic Western values, based on neoliberal values rather than Islamic forces pushing for democracy (Hazran 2012). This Orientalist outlook on the Middle East waters down news coverage with an inherent cultural bias against any form of revolution or democracy that is not intrinsically American. Therefore, the media labels protests as being similar to what Americans are comfortable with, instead of presenting new world ideals.

Untold past and present

Many of the news stories covering the 2009 revolution provide little historical background for these events, including the anti-Western revolution as a backlash against American culture overtaking Persian culture in 1979 (Cutler 2011). This long history between the two states was left unnoticed, though it determined much of how the U.S. government responded to this event. The U.S. government had been waiting

anxiously for a regime change in this country. According to Burns (2009), "It suggests that Bush administration neoconservatives had searched for ways to initiate peaceful 'regime change' in Iran, for instance by mobilizing Barnett's 'sullen majority', and that the US State Department might play a role." This meant the media ignored the controversial and brutal protests that occurred in 1979 as a call for regime change, noting an unsatisfied political climate in Iran 30 years before it came to a boil in 2009.

The only attempt at giving readers an understanding of the turbulent political past in Iran came from Reuters after the protests were quelled. On Feb. 11, 2011, a timeline entitled "32 years of Iran's revolution" was published on the Reuters website (Cutler 2011). However, this short piece was the only attempt at accurately framing the entire picture of Iranian politics without American bias. Short clips gave a month and year for each political crisis that occurred in the country without any way to learn more about each subject through a reliable source. This small attempt shows that the media does not believe readers want background information on issues. This is the wrong ideal as the media's fundamental role should be to give a window in through which the U.S. can view the rest of the world, which means news must include the entire picture or readers are left in the dark (Effendi 2010).

The news media must also analyze the cause of events that may have little solid common knowledge tied to them. There was little analysis of the groups involved in the protest or the political dissent in the past 50 years of the country. The Internet was never questioned as being a weak foundation for political involvement. The focused and often small minority of people who use online mediums for political discourse do

not reflect a greater push from the majority of citizens. In fact, it may even alienate those who are unwilling to explore political ideals, especially in an undemocratic country. "And even with this strong evidence and reference to the phenomenon of 'slacktivism' – the low-risk, low-cost form of political participation by using social media websites – it is believed that it is the design and implementation of these current websites and tools that contribute to this malaise," (Luna-Reyes 2012). In fact, Twitter may have created even more of a gap by connecting "diasporic Iranians" with those with similar interests, which then created bigger rifts between these idealists and those who wanted a different future for Iran (Naghibi 2011). By narrowly reporting on this event, journalists portrayed Twitter as a catalyst for this revolution rather than painting a bigger picture of social issues within Iran.

The news media framed the Iranian revolution as a turbulent protest to capture Western ideals in a drama-filled epic. According to Naghibi (2011), this set the stage for "A public display of emotional intensities which manifested itself through a kind of competition at the level of authenticity through the disclosure of autobiographical experience: alongside postings of the latest update of the street protests, diasporic subjects would share their memories of Iran, positioning themselves as authentic insiders." This intimate public sphere created a race to become the most authentic expert on Iranian culture by sharing intimate experiences first. In a model mimicking the rat race of news sources to get information out first, people shared their stories and memories at a lightning fast rate in hopes of gaining a voice through the online revolution as a whole.

Use of modern martyr without accuracy

Misinformation became a huge problem after security police shot and killed Neda Soltan, an activist in her 20s, during a protest. A video of the tragic death was posted online and quickly spread, creating a firestorm of different stories relating to whom this woman was and what she had done. This created conflicting reports focused on getting the most interesting story out there over focusing on the emotional shock of this incident. "The endless looping of the video of Neda's death on social networking sites and on news media has made a spectacle of her death, invoking representations of the idealized and romanticized gendered corpse," (Naghibi 2011) which created a media circus of the events. This was the event the media chose to focus on rather than the deep-seated causes of the protest itself.

The framing of this protest as a matter of Islam versus Western values did not tell the whole story of the second Iranian revolution in the last century (Naghibi 2011). In the case of Neda, photos of her wearing a hijab and stories of her being a resolute Muslim were absent from many stories that reached U.S. shores. It was much more attractive to paint the young woman as one striving for Western ideals by portraying her without any headdresses or ties to Islam. Images accompanying stories also further desensitized users to the brutality of her death by putting both the video shots and photos of her side by side (Naghibi 2011). This made her story more of a symbol for freedoms she perhaps was not fighting for and buried the story of a young woman who lost her life during violent protests.

A large outcry through an online medium can create an illusion of a certain set of values, which does not reflect what the country actually desires. These young people's Western values toward democracy differ greatly from the past generation's revolution that called for the reinstating of Iran's cultural identity (Burns 2009). These older revolutionaries were mainly absent from the social media stage set by the young elites in 2009. Without proper analysis the U.S. government may have taken interest in hopes this country would adopt a Lockean sense of democracy, which is not possible if the country is fragmented on their political desires.

Few results in revolution

Unfortunately, for Iran, there is little political progress to show for a "Twitter Revolution." President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad continued to stay in power in Iran. While other Middle Eastern countries overthrow dictators, Iran did not achieve its democratic goals. Now there are splits within the protest movement as the young fight for new democratic values while the traditional want to reinstate Islamic political ideals (Rigi 2012). Religious leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Iranian government shows there is much more to this political strife than a split between the young and old. This may even be a case of one dictator making way for another as Khamenei continues splitting the country in hopes for another revolution in his favor (Rigi 2012). This is an avenue rarely explored in Western media and often handed off to Al Jazeera and Middle Eastern bloggers to shine light upon, if U.S. readers view them at all.

Only through acknowledging the inherent Orientalist views of an Islamic form of democracy can American media accurately report on foreign events to U.S. readers. By

not giving American citizens the information they need to make informed decisions outside their country, the media may not be doing a good enough job at assessing the political environment within the U.S. This shows a huge lack of contextual information within stories, which is something the media needs to become aware of, as more people are able to create news through social media platforms. Coverage of the Iranian presidential protests shows a revolution in the way news is dispersed. No longer can journalists continue to be the sole carriers of information as source legitimacy often relies on what is available and who has the most to say. Rather than focus on the dramatic events, such as the tragic death of Neda until it was found she often wore a hijab, the news needs to provide analysis and a place for ideas to actually compete. Readers should be given all of the information needed in both cultural and historical contexts rather than focusing on facts, which is a term the news industry itself has yet to identify.

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