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BY GOLNAZ ESFANDIARI | JUNE 7, 2010



Before one of the major Iranian protests of the past year, a journalist in Germany showed me a list of three prominent Twitter accounts that were commenting on the events in Tehran and asked me if I knew the identities of the contributors. I told her I did, but she seemed disappointed when I told her that one of them was in the United States, one was in Turkey, and the third -- who specialized in urging people to "take to the streets" -- was based in Switzerland.

Perhaps I shattered her dreams of an Iranian "Twitter Revolution." The Western media certainly never tired of claiming that Iranians used Twitter to organize and coordinate their protests following President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's apparent theft of last June's elections. Even the American government seemed to get in on the act. Former U.S. national security adviser Mark Pfeifle **claimed** Twitter should get the Nobel Peace Prize because "without Twitter the people of Iran would not have felt empowered and confident to stand up for freedom and democracy." And the U.S. State Department **reportedly** asked Twitter to delay some scheduled maintenance in order to allow Iranians to communicate as the protests grew more powerful.

But it is time to get Twitter's role in the events in Iran right. Simply put: There was no Twitter Revolution inside Iran. As Mehdi Yahyanejad, the manager of "Balatarin," one of the Internet's most popular Farsi-language websites, **told the *Washington Post*** last June, Twitter's impact inside Iran is nil. "Here [in the United States], there is lots of buzz," he said. "But once you look, you see most of it are Americans tweeting among themselves."

A number of opposition activists have told me they used text messages, email, and blog posts to publicize protest actions. However, good old-fashioned word of mouth was by far the most influential medium used to shape the postelection opposition activity. There is still a lively discussion happening on Facebook about how the activists spread information, but Twitter was definitely not a major communications tool for activists on the ground in Iran.

Nonetheless, the "Twitter Revolution" was an irresistible meme during the

post-election protests, a story that wrote itself. Various analysts were eager to chime in about the purported role of Twitter in the Green Movement. Some were politics experts, like the *Atlantic's* **Andrew Sullivan** and **Marc Ambinder**. Others were experts on new media, like **Sascha Segan of *PC Magazine***. Western journalists who couldn't reach -- or didn't bother reaching? -- people on the ground in Iran simply scrolled through the English-language tweets posted with tag **#iranelection**. Through it all, no one seemed to wonder why people trying to coordinate protests in Iran would be writing in any language other than Farsi.

A pristine instance of this myopia was a **profile**, published in Britain's *Guardian* newspaper, of Oxfordgirl, a Twitter blogger who was described as "a key player" in Iran's postelection unrest. "Before they started blocking mobile phones, I was almost coordinating people's individual movements -- 'go to such and such street,' or 'don't go there, the Basij are waiting,'" she was quoted as saying. It's a riveting story -- but the reporter failed to ask how Oxfordgirl managed to communicate with residents of Tehran via cell phone when the Iranian government shut down the whole city's mobile network, as it always did on days of protest.

Oxfordgirl was ultimately more successful at gaining publicity for herself than at helping any protesters in Iran. Compare her **10,000 Twitter followers** with the 300 followers of a Karaj-based Green activist (who prefers not to be identified or to have his Twitter page publicized). The activist tweets in Persian, which few Western journalists can read, and he is often a source of valuable information about the mood in the country.

The story of Oxfordgirl gives a clue about the real role that Twitter played. There is

no doubt that she helped spread news about the Iranian protests -- often very quickly. Twitter played an important role in getting word about the events in Iran out to the wider world. Together with YouTube, it helped focus the world's attention on the Iranian people's fight for democracy and human rights. New media over the last year created and sustained unprecedented international moral solidarity with the Iranian struggle -- a struggle that was being bravely waged many years before Twitter was ever conceived.

But an honest accounting of Twitter's role in Iran would also note its pernicious complicity in allowing rumors to spread. It began with the many unsubstantiated reports from the protests. In the early days of the post-election crackdown a rumor quickly spread on Twitter that police helicopters were pouring acid and boiling water on protesters. A year later it remains just that: a rumor. Other Twitter stories were quickly debunked, like the suggestion that circulated in late June that Mousavi had been arrested at his home in Tehran.

Twitter followers of #iranelection also helped quickly name Saeedeh Pouraghayy -- who was allegedly arrested for chanting "Allah Akbar" on her rooftop, only to be raped, disfigured and murdered -- a new "martyr" of the Green Movement. Her tragic story quickly made the rounds on Twitter and other social networking websites. Mousavi and his aides even reportedly attended a commemoration ceremony that was held for her in Tehran.

Yet the whole story turned out to be a hoax. Pouraghayy later appeared on a program on Iran's state television and said that on the night when she was supposedly arrested, she had escaped by jumping off her balcony. In the intervening

two months, she said was being treated at the home of the person who found her in the street. A reformist website later wrote that the Iranian government had planted the story in order to cast doubt on opposition claims about the rape of post-election detainees and pave the way for further arrests of opposition leaders. Twitter, it seems, can serve the purposes of Iran's regime as easily as it can aid the country's activists.

To be clear: It's not that Twitter publicists of the Iranian protests haven't played a role in the events of the past year. They have. It's just not been the outsized role it's often been made out to be. And ultimately, that's been a terrible injustice to the Iranians who have made real, not remote or virtual, sacrifices in pursuit of justice.

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*Golnaz Esfandiari is a senior correspondent with Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty.*

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