Social media and Iran's post-election crisis

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ABSTRACT

In this research-in-progress paper, the role of social media during the two months of the Iranian post-election crisis in Summer 2009 has been studied. In search of emergent social phenomena, particular emphasis is given to online participation and collaboration throughout social network sites. This study demonstrates the extent to which such media can gain prominence and challenge traditional practices as well as challenging the next level of research and development of social media during crisis situations.

Keywords

Social media, social network websites, online collaboration and participation, Iran

INTRODUCTION

Social media or social media websites, alternatively referred to as Web 2.0, are supposedly second upgraded versions of the web which are more open, collaborative and participatory (O'Reilly, 2005) by virtue of enabling users (peers, grassroots or back-channel) to actively generate content. Noted by Dellarocas (2003), social media websites are unique in offering the opportunity to users to "make their personal thoughts, reactions and opinions easily accessible to the global community". Instances of these media include Wikis, Blogs, Mashups and in particular Social Network Websties (SNS) as the recent development in the field. The way these tools are used alters a plethora of practices, including communication, collaboration, information dissemination, and social organisation (Benkler 2006; Castells 1996; Rheingold 2002) hence they have the potential to alter how societies are organised. As these media are evolving in terms of design, the circumstances of their deployment by users are taking new shapes. As an instance after the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings people gathered online; participated in list-building activities and identified the names of victims in advance of official news releases (Palen and Vieweg, 2008; Vieweg et al., 2008).

In this paper deployment of social media during Iran's post-election crisis has been explored. In this crisis the pervasive use of Social Network Sites (SNS) by members of the public widened the virtual participation opportunities hence virtually investigating the emergent phenomena became feasible by taking up a virtual ethnography approach and an information science perspective. In the rest of this paper, following relevant background information, the online interactions of grassroots are spelled out in the way they were observed; in an attempt to characterize the emergent activities by placing them in organizational context.

BACKGROUND

The latest Iranian presidential election was held on 12/06/2009 in which Ahmadinejad, the incumbent president, ran against three other candidates. According to Iran's constitution which is often viewed (i.e. by Berkman Centre, 2008) as a peculiar hybrid of authoritarian, theocratic and democratic elements, no president can serve more than two consecutive four-year terms thus Ahmadinejad presumably was highly determined to win his second term. This hybrid system had made national TV and most official publications favour Ahmadinejad in such a way that Ahmadinejad's government would enjoy a decisive advantage in the management of public information. Within hours of the 2009 election the national TV announced Ahmadinejad the winner with 62.63 percent of the votes and Mousavi the runner-up with 33.75 percent of the votes. This statistic brought supporters of Mousavi as well as two other candidates to a state of shock and distress, as in particular Mousavi's supporters strongly believed that he would be the next president of Iran. Mousavi quickly released a statement claiming that he would not surrender to this charade and declared the election to be engineered and rigged. Following this

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dispute, the streets of Tehran witnessed massive numbers of protesters rallying against the perceived rigged election resulting in severe clashes and casualties; and creating news headlines around the globe. According to several official reports, the Iranian government quickly attempted to control the flow of public information in reaction to the ongoing national crisis. They disconnected the SMS system, reduced the landline facilities to national calls and on the June 13th they completely cut internet access; however the traffic was gradually allowed through at a reduced level. The internet censorship which was already in effect was made more rigid, and most SNS got blocked. Prior to the election, Mousavi's campaigners had opened blogs on Facebook and Twitter, with green icons as chosen campaign colour, and would disseminate information about his agenda by those means. By June 20th, it is assumed that at least 24 correspondents were detained in custody including CNN's official correspondent, however most of the foreign journalists were later released and then expelled. The only media which were not disrupted were those fully controlled by government. Observed by other researchers, the use of social media in activities such as facilitating discussion, debate (Kolbitsch et al., 2006) and organising on large scale has already become an established phenomenon; yet Iran's unique circumstances raised the question of what forms of communication in support of information generation, seeking and sharing among the participants would be like.

In an analysis for CNN, Clay Shirky mentioned that shutting the SMS service probably radicalized another part of the population who previously had thought they were not part of the fight. This probably acted as an impetus for them (Iranians) to employ any communicative tool they had available which led them, and subsequently the world, to turn to social media technology. On the 16th of June, the U.S. State Department said it had contacted Twitter to urge it to delay a planned upgrade that would have cut daytime service to those who were disputing their election inside Iran (Source: Reuters, CNN, BBC…etc.) As will be outlined, Iran's crisis provided a great opportunity for social media, in particular SNS, to further their prominence to an unprecedented level.

Method

In this interpretative research virtual ethnography was carried out for a period of at least two months starting from 12 June 2009 through Facebook and Twitter as these two were the most crucial social media used during the crisis period by both grassroots and officials. Collectively through three Facebook accounts (the author's and two other contributors' accounts), 600 users were observed out of which more than 60% were Iranians and the rest were of a variety of nationalities. The visible online interactions that they had regarding Iran's crisis were monitored several times a day. The Facebook groups and micro-blogs which formed during the crisis were monitored and the comments and discussions left in each were read. All the shared files and links related to the crisis were observed carefully. On Twitter, #Iran Election was searched on a daily basis and those users who had largest number of followers, sending tweets on #Iran Election, were often followed. Additionally, as for secondary or external data, BBC world news, CNN, BBC Persian, Voice of America (VOA) Persian, Reuters website, Guardian website, Youtube.com which is already embraced by most users inside SNS, and so on were continuously followed several times a day. Moreover a number of interviews were conducted with nearly 20 grassroots and two correspondents from CNN and the Huffington Post.

Power of seduction

The previous Iranian presidential election (2005) had not enjoyed large citizen participation thus the initial forecasts for the 2009 election were not high. Comments and status updates from a few weeks before the election through Facebook show a variety of views on the distribution of materials about the election throughout SNS. Some would condemn their peers for sharing the materials on the basis that such activities publicize the election and encourage people to vote for candidates who were deemed incapable of reform by most. Not only the presidential debates' videos, but also plenty of elaborately edited photos from Mousavi's offline campaigns were shared and had led to the formation of ephemeral virtual communities around each about the "either to vote or not" issue. A new fashion emerged at this time when some of Mousavi's supporters started to edit their Facebook display photos producing green shadowed photos of themselves. The responses to this fashion, found through Facebook comments, ranged from anger to praise. As time passed the number of those who subscribed themselves to this photo fashion increased. One of the interviewees said in this regard:

"I didn't even know about these candidates nor did I want to vote. I just used to wander in Facebook occasionally and got attracted by these emerging activities, symbols and photo editing and hence decided to experiment (with) the things myself. I was apathetic to vote but after a while I felt this is a different case. I can't say what exactly happened but I think I very much got seduced by the excitement which was generated around the whole thing in my Facebook community".

At the end it was reported that 84% of the electorate participated in this election which was a notable growth from the 2005 election. It is not claimed that such colossal participation took place merely due to the application of social media; but it is sensible to claim that the virtual flâneur who was wandering without destination in SNS found a destination, arriving in a political arena, in response to seduction. The audience was seduced by experimenting with the green (Marres, 2009), photo editing in networked public (Boyd, 2008), and thereby got engaged with politics.

Organising & Information pathways

By June 20th, as the street clashes got more violent and more correspondents were disrupted, the fear of information dearth became more widespread among protesters (Mousavi's supporters) since the remaining stable media inside Iran was only in favour of Ahmadinejad. On the occurrence of such non-routine events during crises, non routine behaviours and new social arrangements including self-organisation by members of the public in response to emergent needs may be resultant (Quarantelli et al., 2006) In this crisis prior to any needs, the need for accurate information was pivotal. During the protests, opportunities for creating new and ephemeral organisations/communities frequently arose. When communities were formed during the protests (i.e. a group of people who had escaped from armed forces to a narrow street); the peers would converse with each other, make sense of the situation and generate information related to their situation; thus **the first** information pathway (Palen and Liu, 2007) would run, between peers in the crisis zone. As an instance, if a peer was seen shot and injured, other peers and local groups in an improvised act would video record the peer by mobile handset and would generate information which was not perishable but traceable. Then a **second** information pathway would run between affected peers and those citizens outside the crisis in the sense that peers would upload the information to the SNS as soon as accessing high speed internet (scarce in those days); and those (i.e. most Iranian diaspora) outside the main site of crisis would receive them, make sense of them, share them or re-produce them. In such a way, the information would enter the distributed networks; arrive at many destinations where ephemeral virtual communities would form around them. The **third** information pathway which was automatically created during this crisis was run between the grassroots and formal global media members who were also watching throughout SNS alongside the outsider grassroots. The **fourth** information pathway was probably run between grassroots from outside the crisis zone and grassroots inside the zone mainly throughout SNS communities regarding the opposition groups' activities.

Several other intertwined information pathways were being run among various communities during this crisis and limited access to internet connection would often disrupt these pathways; at least for a while. In regard to being connected to the crisis, one of the interviewees said:

"The first thing I did, after I heard the election results were disputed, was to check news agencies such as BBC, and VOA Persian. The next thing was to check my Facebook. After a while I figured out that I could find better and untouched information straight from the reports in Facebook. Everyday after work Facebook was the first place I was checking to get the latest videos and rumours".

Although digital messages can easily be transmitted, this may result in the loss of context or a level of distortion therefore an opportunity generation for subversive voices. In fact the case is that two or more social networks which are meant to be separate collide. In this crisis government sympathisers could enter from a point (i.e. an open group) and access the information generated by opposing groups and reproduce them, distort them, and disseminate them from scratch. Evidence of this can be traced back throughout a lot of English language blogs where each of them have provided a different version of one specific story that supposedly was initially picked from SNS.

Rise of global activism

When SNS became the main platform for information aggregation about the crisis event, an opportunity for getting connected to friends' friends who also were affected by crisis arose. This suggests that relationships which may not have otherwise existed between people who have had similar experiences became achievable (Palen et al. 2007); and resulted in large participation in demonstrations both inside and outside Iran mainly in front of Iranian embassies in major capital cities.

Coordinated information technology support (SNS), enabled non-Iranians from outside the affected communities to merge and take part in generating and reproducing information even in the English language; as opposed to all the unidirectional model of information dissemination from Iranian officials to the public. In fact by such cost cut of communication, easy linkages across diverse organisations were achievable through the SNS and they facilitated network-building based on affinities or relatively loose identifications (Bennett, 2003)

of international dimensions. A common theoretical assumption is that such networks are flexible, easy to join and leave, and capable of relatively fluid reorganisation following the addition or loss of organisations (Castells, 1996). The problem of language, (in Iran's case most materials were in Persian) would delay the reorganising and resulted in reduced decision-making coherence across temporary organisations. These decentralized organized protest groups, i.e. in Facebook, of thin ideological ties would enable the virtual flâneur to join these groups from various points of entry. These would often harbour intellectual contradictions leading to the formation of epistemic communities fundamentally questioning the Iranian regime. These groups which took the shape of temporary organisations sometimes fell apart as a result of thin ties, lack of clarity and unstable coalitions but then would refigure themselves (Bennett, 2003). The groups in Facebook which were formed for organising the protests, after experiencing a few clashes and losses, merged in the shape of a centralized organisation for an organised worldwide protest announced for July 25th (http://united4iran.org/).

Collective Intelligence

As the clashes were going on in Iran, the online interactions in Facebook would, apparently, conform to what was going on in the offline zone or perhaps the direction of conforming was the reverse if not bidirectional. Early communications on Facebook included changing display photos to "Where is my vote" drawings in green. The following famous Persian poem:

> *Human beings are members of a whole, In creation of one essence and soul.*
> *If one member is afflicted with pain, Other members uneasy will remain.*
> *If you have no sympathy for human pain, The name of human you cannot retain.*

which carries the concept of collectivity at its core circulated among the users in a variety of forms supposedly in an attempt to call for solidarity and support. In the offline zone, communications appeared in the form of posters of "Where is my vote", banners of the aforementioned poem, candles, green shawls, green objects, allaho akbar chanting ….etc. which would collectively resemble an assemblage of human interaction, communications and cultural symbols. Other kinds of persistent communications that emerged were messages written on the walls and the proliferation of caricatures related to the crisis in the online zone by caricaturists. As the videos which were posted throughout Facebook and Twitter became highly graphic showing disturbing content, the users added a red stain to their "Where is my vote" display photos. As more protesters and political dissidents were arrested and jailed in Iran, a sort of fearful environment was created throughout Facebook. In response to the fear of being identified for anti government activities through Facebook, temporary communities were formed to discuss the issue. This can be marked as a form of distributed problem solving activity for which the solution was name change. Within a short while many users changed their names. The same trend was evident in Twitter where it even allows "username" change in addition to display name change. Following these, more online communities were formed criticizing this name change behaviour, saying that "people in Iran are being killed and in this virtual space we are worrying forour own selves"?

Similar temporary communities would emerge following each shared video. Comments left under these videos (or links) show on each occasion that at first a few users tried to make sense of the content and then questioned the authenticity of the sources or the videos; After a few discussions and confirmatory sort of comments, some have considered the shared information as an authoritative source (Sutton et al., 2008). More activities such as those which resemble collective intelligence learnt from disaster scenarios (i.e. through work of Viewing et al. 2007) happened frequently during Iran's crisis. The next sequence of the "Where is my vote" photo display was "Where is my friend" in reaction to the arrest of more dissidents. Or in case of name change, the next sequence was to change the surnames to "Irani" (Iranian) supposedly as a nationalist and unifying gesture. When the death of Michael Jackson, 25th of June, coincided with crucial days of Iran's crisis, within a few hours of his death, fusion works including videos of "violence against protesters in Iran" mixed with Michael Jackson's songs as the background music were distributed along these networks.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OFFICIAL MEDIA

As Social Network Websites became the primary platform for aggregation of information about Iran's crisis, members of official media adapted themselves to these services more than before especially throughout the third information pathway which was described earlier. Previously researchers had observed that (i.e.) during the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007, the related news was directly picked by CNN from the peer generated information in the SNS but during Iran's crisis, it is assumed that the extent to which such a phenomenon has occurred is unique to this crisis. Such unique reliance of official media on SNS during Iran's crisis can be associated to the co-occurrence of another sub-phenomenon which was the rise of widespread usage of new

media in covering the recent presidential elections (i.e. USA 2008 election) which has led the U.S. media to maintain their usage of these new technologies on all stories since then. Here the archetype of directing the events to official media is provided:

On the 20th of June the footage of the last two minutes of the life of an Iranian girl called Neda Agha Soltan, shot during street rallying, was captured on video by mobile phones of bystanders and was virally distributed across SNS. Within a few hours of her death #Neda tweet became one of the top trending topics in Twitter and then the video went on air through CNN. Iranian official media later confirmed her death but accused foreigners of plotting such a murder for political gain. She quickly became an international heroine and a symbol of the Iranian Green movement. A Street in Rome was also named after her.

As was explained, these phenomena are not entirely new, but they are taking new shapes and are altering formal practices. During this crisis many in-depth talks were held on the BBC and CNN discussing "What is the verification of footage", "What should be picked by official media" and "to what extent the collaboration of official media with absolute grassroots is achievable given ethical journalism". As CNN's correspondent who was interviewed for this paper noted, "Iran's crisis pushed the news verification debate to a serious stage".

CONCLUSION

The exploration of the context suggests that wide-scale employment of social media during Iran's crisis and thereby reflecting on what was happening inside Iran, augmented the public and officials' awareness of the very existence of social media and the potentials of this technology. The way it was embraced by officials and grassroots reveals how new forms of social media can be incorporated into activities of citizens in crisis and complicate formal practices or re-shape them. It draws attention to how this technology should be incorporated with formal responses, i.e. official media, in an effective way. The study can have lessons for future SNS designers, i.e. that they better understand the potentials of this medium in the context of political engagement. Last but not the least; the study suggested that the adaptation to social media by backchannels (grassroots) on a wide-scale in a country with a perceived authoritarian regime acted as a catalyst for social media to enter a new phase of its history and supplied the impetus for the official world to adopt the Technology in a different manner.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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