MEDIA CULTURE &SOCIETY

Twitter's place in the tussle: how old power struggles play out on a new stage

Lindsay Ems
Indiana University, USA

Abstract
The recent proliferation and impact of protest events in the Middle East, northern Africa, and the development of a worldwide Occupy Wall Street movement have ignited inquiry into the people, social structures and technologies that have helped give these social movements form. Three cases are described here which add to this discussion and lead to a pruning of the analytical landscape in this subject area. By looking to the use of Twitter as a tool for political protest in Iran in 2009, Moldova in 2009 and the G-20 Summit in Pittsburgh in 2009, the complexity of the intertwined social and technological strands that have given rise to these new political protests is acknowledged. By realizing that this distinction is salient yet fuzzy, it becomes possible to make new observations, ask new questions and begin to understand the nature of recent political tussles and the communication tools used in them. For instance, this article posits that by seeing the particular use of a new communication tool – a socio-technical assemblage – as an artifact, analysts can learn something new about the motivations of those sitting at the negotiating table.

Due to the recent proliferation and impact of protest events in the Middle East, northern Africa, and the development of a worldwide Occupy Wall Street movement, scholars in a number of disciplines have begun to examine with renewed vigor the people, social structures and technologies that help give these social movements form. In

Corresponding author:
Lindsay Ems, Indiana University, 1229 East 7th St., Bloomington, IN 47405, USA.
Email: lems@indiana.edu

communication, media and technology studies, a new wave of analysis and theory-building is emerging which focuses on the role social and new media technologies are playing in these events. Some theorists have suggested (perhaps too enthusiastically) that new communication technologies like microblogging tool Twitter have had an important impact on these social movements' successes or failures (Allagui and Keubler, 2011; Castells, 2007; Elseewi, 2011; Howard et al., 2011; Segerberg and Bennett, 2011; Shirky, 2008; Wall and El Zaheed, 2011). Others spotlight the social forces responsible for the uprisings but downplay the importance of communication tools (Agre, 2002, 2003; Christensen, 2011; Etling et al., 2010; Hofheinz, 2011; Newsom et al., 2011). Still others argue that both of these perspectives are essential to understanding recent phenomena (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011; Hara and Huang, 2010; Shklovski and Kotamraju, 2011). Interestingly, all of these authors view these two modalities as separate in their discussions of social media and social change. This has implications for what kinds of questions investigators can ask and, correspondingly, the results they present to us. It will be suggested in this article that, by side-stepping this dichotomy, a different kind of inquiry can occur – one that sees technologies as artifacts which reveal the motivations and actions of the people and institutions using them.

This article seeks to bring analytical clarity to the inquiry as to how new communication technologies like Twitter impact negotiations of political power. In the following pages, three protest events will be described where Twitter was first used as a tool for bringing about social change. These cases describe protest events related to the 2009 Iranian elections, protests following fraudulent Moldovan elections in 2009 and protests at the 2009 G-20 Summit in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

These particular cases have been chosen, from among the many recent protests in which Twitter was used, because they illustrate an important point: that variances in the use of a single tool call into question the dichotomous thinking that highlights social forces and downplays the materiality of the technology and vice versa. The reality is that the line between the technological and the social is fuzzy. This fuzziness should not be seen as analytically troubling. Instead, it is in these areas of fuzzy distinctions that one is clearly able to see the political motivations of specific governmental actors, protesters and protest observers (mass media outlets etc.) in ways not possible before.

Technological artifacts like Twitter represent certain decisions (social forces) which have become congealed for an amount of time. Social forces, on the other hand, are more dynamic and ever changing. By questioning the hard distinction between social forces and technological affordances, we might begin to approach our inquiry of socio-technical phenomena by examining configurations of people and technologies as cultural artifacts. These artifacts reveal how the will, power and resources of some people come into conflict, engage and overpower others within a society. Because tweets are short, easily searchable, digestible and extremely public, the government's actions in the cases under discussion were made publicly observable in an entirely new way.

Media materiality scholars (Hayles, 2004; Kittler, 1999; Larkin, 2008) have shown that today's communication tools offer certain affordances that are different from previous tools. (e.g. they have a more open architecture.) Because of the material conditions and ubiquity of today's networked communication tools, it is argued that negotiations of power and the positions/motivations of conflicting parties are more

public now more than ever before. This is an advantage, in most respects, for protesters not governments.

Still, evidence suggests that new communication tools by themselves do not ensure the success of anti-government protests. Social theorists like Phillip Agre (2002) suggest that technologies are simply amplifiers of previously instantiated social forces, orientations and motivations. Political activities, according to this perspective, are embedded in larger social processes and technologies act to change the arena in which social and institutional forces play out while amplifying particular forces unequally. According to Agre, "the Internet does not create an entirely new political order; to the contrary, to understand its role requires that we understand much else about the social processes that surround it" (2002: 315). Sensitized by Agre's insights, this article stays away from simple and falsely simplifying formulations and delves into the complications of the intertwined social and technological strands that enable new kinds of political protests.

Case 1: The protests following the Iranian election in 2009

On 12 June 2009 presidential elections were held in Iran following a campaign that saw huge rallies supporting both incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and opposition leader Mir Hossein Moussavi. On 13 June Moussavi called for vote counting to stop because there were "blatant violations." The government said that Ahmadinejad won with 62.63% of the vote against Moussavi's 33.75%. At this announcement crowds took to the streets of Tehran. People broke into shops, tore down signs and started fires in protest. On 14 June Ahmadinejad gave his victory speech and said he would now guarantee Moussavi's safety. Arabic network Al-Arabiya's Tehran bureau was closed for a week by authorities without reason and protests continued by Moussavi supporters. These protests brought about a counter-action from Ahmadinejad supporters resulting in tens of thousands of protesters rallying in Tehran. People were beaten with clubs and shot. Much of this was captured in photographs and video taken with the cell phones and handheld cameras of protesters and would appear in western news coverage of the events.

On 15 June the media rights group Reporters Without Borders urged nations not to recognize the results of the elections, suggesting that censorship and the banning of western media was evidence of fraud. Moussavi supporters took to the streets again and held the largest protest since the 1979 Iranian revolution. Foreign media were banned from the streets of Tehran and thousands of people continued to protest in the nation's capital. Iran's Revolutionary Guard threatened legal action against websites it said were inciting violence and accused American and Canadian companies of supporting the websites (I assume Twitter is included here though it is not explicitly identified). The government suggested that these websites were involved in the organization of the protests which they held responsible for the violent acts perpetrated in the streets.

News media in the United States were transfixed with this story, broadcasting updates continuously despite western journalists' limited access. Because of this, news outlets became dependent on the information generated by Iranians. The BBC's Persian-language television channel reported receiving about five videos a minute from amateurs, even though the channel was blocked within Iran, and 4000 emails and hundreds of phone calls a day. News outlets also turned to Twitter for information, including

images and video, along with eyewitness accounts of events on the streets. CNN's Wolf Blitzer and Abbi Tatton used conversations on Twitter to help them complete a view of what was unfolding in Iran. Perhaps the most frequently circulated story from the Iranian protests plays out in a video of an Iranian woman named, Neda Agha-Soltan, dying after being shot while walking with her singing instructor on the street. A bystander caught her death on video and posted it to the internet. This video became the source of much inspiration for Moussavi supporters in Iran and around the world. This video's link was distributed frequently through Twitter.

Because of this some observers lauded Twitter for its ability to capture events as they were unfolding in a way not possible before. *Atlantic Monthly* blogger Andrew Sullivan described the tweets as "the raw data of history, as it happens." He said, "Whatever you'd like to call it, it seems that Twitter has finally hit the big-time as a respected journalistic medium" (in Reed, 2009).

This utopian feeling seemed to permeate much of the news coverage on the Iranian elections, even when Twitter's role was questioned. Much news coverage contained a consistent frame, assuming that Twitter performed a liberating role for Iranian dissenters during these protests. CNN reported that the internet and cell phone connections were very slow in Iran as events were unfolding and that the government there was blocking certain websites. The government did block Twitter but some tech-savvy users were able to navigate around the censors. For this reason many commentators think that referring to the events in Iran as a "Twitter Revolution," as some did, was inappropriate.

Furthermore, most of the tweets about the election came from outside of Iran. The Web Ecology Project's (WEP, 2009) report suggests that the main suppliers of on-the-ground information to the Twitter community (they judge this by the number of times their tweets were retweeted) contributed only 4% of the 2,024,166 tweets they counted. It was reported that there were only about 8600 Twitter users in all whose profiles indicated they were from Iran at the time. This number is quite small compared to the 480,000 users who contributed to the Twitter conversation on the Iranian elections, according to the WEP report.

In news coverage it was repeatedly stated that Twitter use in the Iranian elections was not new in its ability to help people organize the protests; however, many observers suggested that Twitter's ability to get word of the events out to western media *was* new. *Wired* magazine's Nicholas Thompson reported that Twitter was being used for some internal communications but its primary use was to spread the word to the outside world. Evgeny Morozov said that "in terms of involving the huge Iranian diaspora and everyone with a grudge against Ahmadinejad, [Twitter] has been very successful" (Morozov, 2009).

Because of the media coverage of the events, the West began to show sympathy for the protesters in Iran and began participating from afar in the part of the protest that was occurring online. On 16 June *The Times* reported, "One Facebook group called I Love Iran already has 65,000 members" (Evans, 2009). Similarly, many Twitter users added a green tint to their profile picture on Twitter to show their solidarity with Moussavi supporters. This sympathy was also conveyed back to the protesters; according to CNN Iranian political analyst, Reza Goharzad (2009), the protesters "see the solidarity and having the same slogans and wearing the same color and putting all together in one thing, they want the re-election. They want their freedom. They want the freedom of speech."

Twitter use undoubtedly presented the Iranian government with new challenges in the suppression of dissent. With images of large numbers of people in the streets and videos of deaths and beatings in Iran achieving widespread visibility in the West, many thought the rigid but powerful police state would come crashing down. CNN's Fareed Zakaria said, "The basic idea of Iran's revolution – that a group of clerics with special access to divine revelations are the final legitimate authority – that idea has cracked. The final authority, it appears, comes from the people" (Zakaria, 2009).

Hindsight shows, however, that Ahmadinejad was still in power four years after the elections. This does not mean, though, that the protests were unsuccessful. On 15 December 2009, protests in Tehran were still occurring. These have occurred with less frequency and with fewer protesters attending, but the Iranian government has felt a constant challenge since the 12 June 2009 election. Furthermore, it can be argued that subsequent protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and in the United States in 2010, 2011 and 2012 were ignited by the spark the of the protests in Iran.

Similarly, Twitter's role in getting information to the West did not go unnoticed by the Obama administration and may have been used as strategic move on its part in the ongoing chess match between the US and Iranian governments. It contacted Twitter directly and asked that it delay scheduled system maintenance which would make Twitter inaccessible in Iran during the post-election protests. This information was revealed to reporters by an anonymous State Department official who said the request was made by the youngest member of the State Department's policy planning staff, Jared Cohen. He is said to have made the request in an email to Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey. Cohen "has been working with Twitter, YouTube Facebook and other services to harness their reach for diplomatic initiatives in Iraq and elsewhere" (Landler and Stelter, 2009). The State Department says, for Iranian protesters "the Twitter service was all the more important because the Iranian government had shut down other websites, cell phones and newspapers" (Carmichael, 2009). This was the first time that the U.S. government openly asked a privately owned social networking website to play a role in international affairs. The Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, P.J. Crowley, suggested that this request did not amount to meddling, it "is completely consistent with our national policy. We are proponents of freedom of expression. Information should be used as a way to promote freedom of expression" (Landler and Stelter, 2009). This stands in stark contrast to the U.S. government's reaction to Twitter being used to evade police in Pittsburgh during the G-20 protests in which protesters were arrested for tweeting the locations of the police. It also highlights the moral and ethical values of the U.S. government as they use new media tools to exert power over their adversaries.

The State Department's actions in the Iranian case are noteworthy. Landler and Stelter (2009) report that these actions are in line with a larger move towards increasing its use of social networking tools in its diplomatic initiatives. In May 2009, Cohen and Dorsey met with Iraq's deputy prime minister to discuss rebuilding the country's information network and to sell the virtues of Twitter. It is clear that the Obama administration believes that Twitter and other social networking tools have distinct political potential, especially with regard to diplomacy in the Middle East. Jared Cohen's position within the Office of Policy Planning makes him "responsible for counter-terrorism, counter-radicalization, the Persian Gulf, Public Diplomacy, Muslim world outreach, new

technology and eMedia, and Youth issues" (U.S. Department of State, 2009). That this position exists suggests that the Obama administration sees new media technologies as important diplomatic tools, especially in countries where there is a large (sometimes anti-American) youth population. By asking Twitter to delay scheduled maintenance, the Obama administration furthered its political agenda. In the analysis of the G-20 summit protests, we will see that the State Department also uses these tools politically. Comparing these actions to one another makes the U.S. government's actions in Iran appear quite hypocritical.

In summary, because most tweets about the Iranian elections were not being consumed or acted upon by individuals within Iran, and instead were being widely circulated by interested outsiders, it is clear that Twitter was used primarily as a tool for information dissemination from Iran to the western media. Twitter indeed played an important part in challenging the Iranian government as evidenced by the government taking down the telecommunications networks. However, the end result at this point in time suggests that these challenges were overcome by the autocratic regime in Iran.

Case 2: The protests following the Moldovan election in 2009

In Moldova, the events began with a parliamentary election held on 5 April. After the elections, the incumbent Communist leadership was declared the winner, claiming to have won 49.48% of votes and securing 60 seats. Sixty-one are necessary to appoint a president but the communists claimed victory anyway. The opposition declared that the elections were fraudulent. On 6 April, a small group of students, including 25-year-old Natalia Morar, spontaneously organized what they thought would be a small peaceful protest using the internet. Morar said a few of her friends met in a café and came up with an idea, "It just happened through Twitter, the blogosphere, the Internet, SMS, websites and all this stuff. We just met, we brainstormed for 15 minutes, and decided to make a flashmob" (Moldova's 'Twitter revolutionary' speaks out, 2009). In a few hours there were 15,000 people on the streets of Moldova's capital, Chisinau. The protests started peacefully but they soon became violent. On 7 April, witnesses report that crowds poured into Moldova's parliament building smashing windows and setting furniture on fire.

The Communist Party leader, Vladimir Voronin, who was scheduled to step down after serving the maximum presidential term limit, claimed that there were no irregularities during the election. He said that the authorities would find out who the organizers were and claimed that these organizers had malicious intent. The government responded to the violent protests by blasting protesters with tear gas and jets of water. Medical officials said more than 30 people were injured and one woman had choked to death from carbon monoxide poisoning in the parliament building fire.

Moldova's Communist government appeared to claim electoral victory and remained in power after the protests in April. They even withstood another round of parliamentary elections in July 2009. However, on 8 August, the three opposition parties combined forces to create a majority coalition that pushed the Communist Party into opposition. They created a pro-western coalition led by the new premier of Moldova, Vlad Filat, who replaced Vladimir Voronin.

Unlike the Iranian case, the protests in Moldova may indeed have triggered a change in governmental leadership. In Moldova's case, as mentioned above by Natalia Morar, it was widely reported that Twitter (along with other tools) was used to organize the protest. Of the situation in Moldova, *New York Times* journalist, Ellen Barry (2009) said:

> The sea of young people reflected the deep generation gap that has developed in Moldova, and the protesters used their generation's tools, gathering the crowd by enlisting text-messaging, Facebook and Twitter, the social messaging network.

> The protesters created their own searchable tag on Twitter, rallying Moldovans to join and propelling events in this small former Soviet state onto a Twitter list of newly popular topics, so people around the world could keep track.

In the Moldovan case, it seems quite clear that Twitter's primary use was to organize the protests. The extent to which it was responsible for the protest organization, especially in relation to the use of other media like SMS, blogs, websites, phone calls, word of mouth, etc., is unclear. It is uncertain just how big a role Twitter played in the leadership change. Because of other factors in the Moldovan case, it maybe that this revolution would have happened anyway. Certainly, though, the fact that a flashmob was created in such a short time through the use of social media tools gave the movement a very powerful start.

Case 3: G-20 summit, Pittsburgh, PA

The Pittsburgh G-20 summit took place on 22–5 September 2009. According to g20.org, the G-20 stands for the group of 20, comprising the finance ministers and central bank governors of the world's most affluent countries. The informal group meets twice a year. Critics of the G-20 often cite their promotion of capitalism at the expense of human rights, labor and the environment. G-20 summits are frequent sites of protest and the September 2009 summit was no different.

G-20 summit protesters in Pittsburgh encountered a number of obstacles to voicing their opinions. First, groups like Code Pink were denied permits to protest peacefully by the U.S. Secret Service, the Department of Homeland Security, the City of Pittsburgh, and the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. They were granted this right only after suing in District Court. The protests began as peaceful conference gatherings in the days before the summit began and remained peaceful as street protests began on Wednesday 22 September.

On the afternoon of Thursday 23 September, protesters began marching towards the David L. Lawrence Convention Center where the summit was taking place. They encountered riot police on the way who fired a sound cannon called an LRAD (long-range acoustic device) at them hoping to deter them from going forward. According to *The New York Times*, this is the first time an LRAD has been used in the U.S. on protesters. Police also threw tear gas canisters and stun grenades that exploded with sharp flashes of light at protesters. The police told protesters that they had assembled unlawfully: "You

must leave the immediate vicinity," the voice over the loudspeaker said, adding that if the protesters did not, they would be subject to arrest and would face "the use of riot control agents" and "less lethal munitions" (Urbina, 2009).

In a number of sources it appears that the damage done by protesters amounted to some broken windows, a vandalized police car and an overturned dumpster. Many reports after the G-20 summit cite an overreaction on the part of the police. Protester Jason Bermas (2009) describes his experiences of one isolated protest event:

> 1,200 Riot Police and Military Personal rabidly attacked a group of well under 300 American citizens, many of them just students that were unaware there was even a protest going on.… [There were] out of control authorities mercilessly attacking an unarmed crowd with batons, tear gas, pepper spray, sound weapons, and rubber bullets.

Twitter was used to help protesters dodge the riot police in the streets of Pittsburgh. The biggest news media story to come out of the G-20 protests described a man being arrested for using Twitter in this way during the protests. Elliot Madison, a New York City social worker, was arrested for using Twitter to tell people where police were located. He was charged with hindering apprehension or prosecution, criminal use of a communication facility, and possession of instruments of crime. His tweets contained publicly available information about police activities. When he was arrested, he was tweeting from a hotel room which was raided by the police. He was in jail when the protests turned violent on 24 September. Exactly one week later, FBI agents raided his New York home, conducted a 16-hour search and took a number of things, including stuffed animals. In the first week of November, the Allegheny county District Attorney dropped all charges against him.

A CNN.com video story showed correspondent Brian Todd in the middle of the protests right after the police had launched a tear gas grenade. A fellow protester told him to "put his head down- like that, sideways" as he poured water into Brian Todd's mouth because he was coughing from the gas. Todd went on to refer to the protesters as "so-called political anarchists." He described Madison's arrest, "police busted the two men in a hotel room where they say the men were observed sitting in front of computers and maps wearing headphones and microphones" (Attorney: Info sent to G-20 protesters via Twitter was public. 2009). Most stories about the G-20 protests took this form. They discuss the dramatic events on the street, refer to the protesters as anarchists and discuss Elliot Madison's arrest.

For example, a story from the *New York Daily News* frames Madison as a misfit and suggests that the police were justified in invading his home:

> Agents from the Joint Terrorist Task Force seized a cache of mischief-making paraphernalia from Madison's Jackson Heights home, where a black and red anarchist flag hangs from the awning.

> Assistant U.S. Attorney Andrew Goldsmith said the agents found gas masks, sharp-metal caltrops which can be thrown in the street to puncture tires and injure police horses, liquid mercury, beakers and test tubes, walkie-talkies and a slingshot.

> There was a chilling poster with the slogan, "I love the bicycle bomber," apparently referring to the cyclist who bombed the armed forces recruiting station in Times Square in 2006. (Marzulli, 2009)

In a Wired.com article, the "sharp-metal caltrops" and gas masks were said to have been used in his work as a volunteer in rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina. Wired.com says this is backed up by a YouTube clip that Madison made prior to the raid which shows how these things are used in a disaster situation.

In a number of stories about Madison's arrest the discrepancies between the U.S. government's reaction to Twitter as a tool for freedom of speech in Iran and Pittsburgh were discussed. For example in his Wired.com article, Singel (2009) says:

> If Madison were an Iranian using Twitter to coordinate government protests, he'd likely be considered a hero in the West. Instead, the self-identified anarchist – who volunteered in Louisiana after Katrina – is now facing up to five years in prison for each count a grand jury cares to indict him on.

In the Iranian case, the State Department said: "We are proponents of freedom of expression. Information should be used as a way to promote freedom of expression" (Landler and Stelter, 2009). In the G-20 case, using Twitter to speak out against the government is a crime for which one could be arrested. It seems the government understands very well the potential challenges Twitter use and social protest pose to autocratic control structures as they are put to use by insurgents within a broader democratic political framework. In some cases it must do what it can to minimize these challenges for itself and in some cases it must help bring about these challenges for its enemies. The free flow of information made possible by Twitter in Iran helped the Obama administration achieve its diplomatic goals. In Pittsburgh, limiting the flow of tweeted information by arresting users (and deterring others from using it) helped it to achieve its goals. In this case the communication tools used to negotiate political power made the ethics, morals and values of the US government visible in ways impossible to see before.

Conclusion

The analysis of these three cases shows that the use of new communication technologies makes the actions and motivations of political agents visible in new ways. When the U.S. government asked the CEO of Twitter to leave the service up in Iran but arrested Elliot Madison in Pittsburgh for using Twitter it became clear that its main goals were not to secure the freedoms of its citizens or Iranian citizens. The reason they asked Twitter to stay up and running in Iran was not about ensuring freedom of expression. It was an effort to incite sympathy among Americans for the Iranian anti-government movement. They were well aware that creating a swell of empathy in the West might motivate anti-Ahmadinejad protesters on the ground in Iran to keep fighting against the dictator they and the U.S. government deplore.

In Iran, Moldova and the G-20, the government took down elements of the telecommunications infrastructure or websites in an effort to stifle protesters. This breakdown in

connectivity became highly symbolic. For those who experienced this authoritarian move, it became clear that the government's desire for power was privileged over its citizens' freedoms and economic pursuits.

Protesters now have a visible channel through which to coordinate mobilization efforts and strategies, express dissent and attract empathetic compatriots in their fight against centralized governmental power. In doing this, their motives and actions become more visible to observers. In the Iranian case, though only a small percentage of tweets originated in Iran, protesters leaked information about the atrocities perpetrated by police on the streets in Tehran to western media outlets as they fought for free elections. This information spread and was consumed by an enormous audience abroad via the internet and through traditional mass media news outlets who turned to Twitter for information. Twitter was used to organize a flashmob in Moldova which led many observers to name their movement the 'Twitter Revolution' as they sought free elections. In the G-20, protesters aimed to show their concern for humanitarian and environmental issues and used Twitter to avoid police blockades. Though Twitter played an important functional role in each case, it also gives observers a new place to look to begin to better understand the dynamics of the conflict. This is especially true because the voices of groups that went largely unheard in previous protests now have the ability to frame coverage of these conflicts.

In each case, the relatively open nature of the internet and the ubiquity of tools like smartphones, computers, cameras and web-based applications like Twitter, YouTube and Facebook allowed for information to flow from the bottom up instead of the top down. Many news departments today are facing budget cuts and are looking to citizen journalists and stories from social media to help produce news cheaply. Now, information about protests originates at the bottom of the social structure and flows out through a lateral network over the internet and then to the top (where media and governmental elites typically curate news packaging) and out for widespread consumption through traditional mass media.

Additionally, people who are not geographically proximate to the protests are increasingly able to participate in them. They provide important resources in the currency of emotional support, interest and sympathy. These resources are invaluable as they help motivate protesters in the street to keep fighting, even when success seems unlikely. They provide technical assistance from afar by helping those on the ground circumvent firewalls. Virtual protesters re-tweet, forward and share information from protesters on the ground with their social networks. They learn about police brutality and express sympathy in extremely personal forums such as Facebook and Twitter newsfeeds. All of these actions contribute to the multi-faceted experience and outcome of today's social movements.

Funding

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