

A Guide to New Media in Iran

New technologies played a major role in the events leading up to and following the recent Iranian elections and should continue to have a tremendous impact. Social networking tools such as Twitter, Facebook, blogs, YouTube, Flickr, and Wikipedia have changed the way Iranian citizens communicate with each other as well as with the outside world. Below is a guide to better understanding these technologies and their impact in Iran.

TWITTER

Twitter has been called a social networking and “micro-blogging” service — it combines elements of text messaging, social networking sites, and blogging all in one.

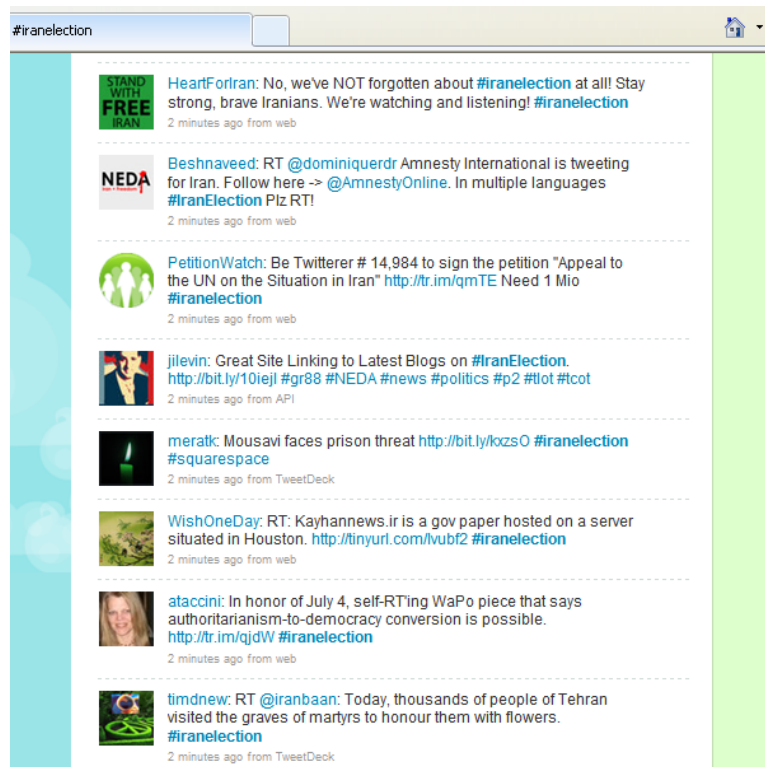
Twitter users, called “tweeters,” can send short messages — “tweets” — of up to 140 characters to other users. Tweets are posted to the author’s main page on the Twitter website and can also be sent directly by email or text message to users who have subscribed to that person’s feed. Readers can also search for tweets by topic.

Technologically, Twitter is not run through its website only. Users can “tweet” directly from a cell phone and send a message to a wide audience through any number of third-party services that bypass the central website.

Twitter has been described as more participatory and personal than any social networking service before it — a protestor in Tehran can tweet a message directly from the demonstration into the phone of an individual across the world.

Twitter in Iran:

- Twitter brought a new level of interconnectivity and integration to the information coming out of Iran, tying together all forms of new media and magnifying their reach.
- Twitter’s decentralized technology makes it more immune than other forms of media to censorship in Iran. Even with Twitter.com shut down, Iranians were still able to use the service to spread word of protest plans.
- The U.S. State Department recognized the site’s importance to demonstrators and even requested that Twitter delay standard maintenance during the protests.
- Iranians also used Twitter to send firsthand reports of violence to an international audience. Tweets from Iranians on the ground, carrying news and often links to firsthand videos or photos, were sent directly to readers from around the world. Every tweet’s reach could easily be magnified through “retweeting,” or forwarding the message received to a broader group of Twitter users.



- Tweeters around the world also tuned in to the events in Iran by following specific topics through “hashtags” (labels) like #iranelection which compiled hundreds of thousands of messages by Twitter users in Iran and around the world commenting on the situation.
- While tweets have no guarantee of credibility, and Twitter has been used to spread misinformation as well, the service was still often the dominant source of news coming out of Iran during the election and was even quoted by established media outlets.

FACEBOOK:

Facebook is a social networking site that allows individuals to connect with friends, build communities, communicate, and share information with people around the world. Today, Facebook has over 200 million active users, half of whom sign on at least once daily and at least seventy percent of whom live outside the United States. While Facebook’s original design was centered on creating a personal profile and connecting to other users one-by-one, the site has expanded to offer ways to create larger communities based on other affiliations. Members can join ‘groups’ devoted to anything from a hobby to a political cause or become a fan or follower of a ‘page’ for a favorite celebrity or organization. These groups provide discussion boards and messaging among members.

Facebook in Iran:

- After years of being restricted, Facebook was unblocked in Iran in January 2009. However, the ban was reinstated during three key campaign days in May after Iranian authorities realized opposition candidates were using the site to rally support: the page of candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi had over 6,000 supporters.
- Opposition candidates have continued to use Facebook as a powerful way to communicate with supporters and coordinate demonstrations. Today, Mousavi’s Facebook page has close to 108,000 fans and attracts multiple posts per hour, in both Farsi and English, by readers all over the world. The user, identifying himself as Mousavi, also posts messages every few hours.
- The international community has used Facebook to voice its support for the protestors in different ways. The group “100 Million Facebook Members for Democracy in Iran,” formed by one Facebook user in New York on June 18, already has over 195,000 members. Many individual users changed their personal profiles to include photographs and messages in support of the Iranian protestors.

The screenshot shows the Facebook profile of Mir Hossein Mousavi. The profile picture is a portrait of him with a white beard and glasses. The cover photo features a green and white graphic with Persian text. The profile bio is in both Persian and English, stating: "lot of information has to flow to Iran, create a Wallinglist and spend some time to sort and send the news. If you believe it or not, Your Wallinglist is the main media. ارسال و ارتقا را به انتخاب و ارسال. انتخاب فراموش نشود. سعی کنید زمانی از روزتان را به انتخاب و ارسال. انتخاب فراموش نشود. سعی کنید زمانی از روزتان را به انتخاب و ارسال. انتخاب فراموش نشود. سعی کنید زمانی از روزتان را به انتخاب و ارسال." Below the bio, there are sections for "Just Fans" and "Support to Friends". The "Support to Friends" section lists contact information: "Twitter: mousavi1388", "Yahoo MI Feed: myvote99@yahoo.com", and "www.facebook.com/mousavi". The "Information" section lists: "Country: Iran", "Current Office: Office: President", "Party: هر شهروند یک ستاد، هر ایرانی یک شهروند". The "Supporters" section shows a list of users who have supported the page, including Parisa, Shem, Valid, Amirreza Kharshidi, and Ico Salerno. The main feed shows several posts, including a video titled "Freedom, Glory, Be Our Name" and a post asking "WHERE IS MY VOTE? - MUST SEE!!!!!!".

BLOGS:

A **blog**, short for ‘weblog’, is essentially an online journal. Blogs typically consist of an individual’s running commentary on a subject — personal, political, or otherwise — with entries organized in chronological order. Readers can opt to follow a blog continuously by subscribing to its “RSS feed,” a feature which alerts the reader whenever the chosen blog is updated. More interactive than the average website, blogs allow room for readers’ commentary and often incorporate images, videos, and more recently, Twitter feeds into posts.

Blogging in Iran:

- Iran boasts one of the world’s largest and most active blogospheres, with an estimated 60,000 regularly updated blogs. Blogging took off in Iran in response to increased censorship of traditional forms of media over the last decade, although the Iranian government has since begun to target bloggers and block blogs deemed controversial.
- Blogs proved to be an important way to collect and publish immediate updates from Iran — often with multimedia — to share with Iranians and the rest of world.
- While bloggers lack the stamp of credibility of established news outlets, some have been identified as trusted sources and have been quoted by traditional media outlets. For example, the “Tehran Bureau,” a blog run by a Boston-based Iranian woman, quickly became one of the most up-to-date sources of breaking news in the wake of the election.

YOUTUBE:

YouTube is a free video sharing website that enables users to easily upload and share videos. Videos range from humorous clips to home videos to footage of events from all over the world. The YouTube site comprises 60 percent of all videos watched online, with more than 100 million videos viewed each day and over 20 hours of new videos uploaded every minute. Three quarters of YouTube’s material comes from outside of the United States.

YouTube in Iran:

- After professional journalists were silenced or forced out of Iran, YouTube became the dominant source of footage from the country. Iranian civilians took videos — often on their cell phones — and were able to upload them directly from the protest to share with an international audience via YouTube.
- While the videos’ origins and validity could often not be proved, major media outlets began relying on amateur YouTube clips and incorporating them into their programming.
- YouTube — one of the most popular websites in Iran — was blocked by the Iranian government at the time of the election.

FLICKR:

Flickr is an image hosting and sharing site, boasting 3.6 billion images with thousands of new photos tagged per minute. Users can upload photos to the website through a computer or directly from a camera phone. Flickr allows users to comment on each other’s photos and add descriptive tags that immediately link the photo at hand to related shots by other users. In this way, one person’s photo is grouped with others’, creating a community of photographers tied by interests or causes and a collection of photos that any user can search for by keywords. Flickr is particularly popular among bloggers, because it enables them to directly and instantly post photos to their blogs.

Flickr in Iran:

- Flickr's capacity for immediate posting meant that most photos of the events in Iran appeared on Flickr (and then on blogs) before being published in any major media outlet.
- Because of restrictions on professional journalists, Flickr photos were not only the fastest but some of the only photos available. As with YouTube, these citizen shots were quickly borrowed by traditional media sources.
- Flickr's blog-friendly design meant that photos immediately reached a wider audience through publication on blogs.

WIKIPEDIA:

Wikipedia is a publically editable, volunteer-produced encyclopedia. As in a traditional encyclopedia, each entry strives to present a "neutral" summary of a given topic. All entries are produced by citizen contributors, and any reader can contribute to or change the content on a page. Wikipedia articles do not undergo an official or systematic editing process; content is peer-reviewed without any formal structure beyond minimal oversight provided by volunteer administrators. The multiple contributors to each page can bring disagreements about content to a "discussion page" provided for each entry.

Wikipedia in Iran:

- Wikipedia became not only a source of background information but also of breaking news on Iran in recent weeks. During the election and subsequent protests, countless users jumped in to contribute to the "Iranian Presidential Elections 2009" page and to other related subjects. On June 14, a major protest day, the site was edited 300 times, with content changing literally within minutes.
- The furious edits were part information gathering, part discussion as users debated the facts posted and made changes back and forth. Wikipedia administrators were even led to put the page under "semi-protected" status, which prohibits anonymous or first-time contributors from editing, in an effort to avoid vandalism.
- Because of the frequent updating, Wikipedia pages on major topics concerning the Iranian elections skyrocketed to the top of Google search results and attracted more viewers, edging out traditional media outlets as a source for news and information.