

## **New Media Technology and the Uprisings in Iran and Tunisia**

Nazanine Moshiri

### **Abstract**

By comparing experiences in Iran and Tunisia, this short piece points the similar aims but different types of challenges, cultural nuances and realities that have affected the popular uprisings in these countries and the outcome of the struggle for rights and democracy.

### **Biography**

Nazanine Moshiri is a Presenter and Correspondent for Al Jazeera English. For the past four years she has covered some of the most important stories for the Network. She has reported extensively from throughout Europe as well as in Afghanistan and Iran. Amongst her most important interviewees have been British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, the Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Venezuelan President, Hugo Chavez, and Ali Akhbar Salehi, the current Iranian Foreign Minister. She was embedded with Russian troops during the Russian-Georgian War and was one of the first journalists to reach Tskhinvali in South Ossetia after the Russian invasion of 2008 and L'Aquila, Italy, after the 2009 earthquake.

More recently Nazanine reported from Tunisia during and after the fall of President Ben Ali. Before Al Jazeera, Nazanine was a well-known face in Britain, reporting and presenting for ITN. Nazanine was born in Tehran, her family moved to the UK in 1978, before the Islamic Revolution. In addition to English, she speaks Farsi, Italian and French. She has a Postgraduate degree in Journalism from the University of Westminster and a BA (Hon) from University College London in Modern European Studies.

### **New Media Technology and the Uprisings in Iran and Tunisia**

I arrived in Tunisia the day after Ben Ali fled, the uprising, which ousted the former President after 23 years in power, has now spread across the Arab world. Some have called it the first successful “Twitter”, or “Facebook”, revolution. If Tunisia sparked a wave of popular uprisings then Iran was the birthplace of citizen journalism. Like in Iran, Ben Ali clamped down on Internet access.

However, while many sites were blocked, interestingly Ben Ali allowed access to Facebook. Nobody knows for sure why that was; one theory is that he just did not see the threat. Activists in Tunisia used Facebook to share video and information, which was to prove crucial. It is estimated that around 1.7 million Tunisians have an account with the social networking site. So, while Tunisians television screens and radios were filled with the State's one-sided take on protests and events, around a fifth of the population was able to receive and also spread an alternative picture. Many believe that even if Ben Ali had blocked Facebook, an Internet savvy generation would have followed Iran's example and gone through proxy sites. Despite restrictions on access to Facebook in Iran, according to [worldpress.org](http://worldpress.org), it is estimated that around 700,000 users were active from February 2008 to June 2009.<sup>23</sup> YouTube is also blocked, and again despite a massive Internet clampdown in the Islamic Republic, the BBC says it was receiving around eight videos a minute at the height of the 2009 unrest. Al Jazeera does not have any concrete numbers, but it ran a special Iran desk, monitoring news coming in from Twitter and YouTube.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.worldpress.org/Mideast/3699.cfm> [Accessed 17 April 2011]

Like many of my colleagues at the time, I was astounded by the constant flow of footage out of Iranian cities despite the challenges being faced. The editorial decision on which video clips to run, was mostly based on the quality of the video, which was sometimes extremely poor. The problem with citizen journalism whether it is in Iran, Tunisia or Egypt is actually verifying what you are seeing. Most of the time it is extremely difficult to confirm when, where, or by whom the footage was taken, unless you are lucky enough to get in touch with the people who actually filmed the video. As importantly, for many western media organisations with no expert knowledge of the Farsi language, there was an over reliance on English language tweets which were difficult to verify. Golnaz Esfandiari in her foreign policy article from June 2010 makes an important point, “Simply put: There was no Twitter Revolution inside Iran.” She writes, “Western journalists who couldn’t reach—or didn’t bother reaching - people on the ground in Iran simply scrolled through the English-language tweets post 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.”<sup>24</sup>

In Tunisia, French is just as widely spoken as Arabic, and are both widely spoken and written, so many young people were writing their Tweets and blogs in French, making it far easier for the International media to get immediate news from the streets. Notwithstanding, like many International journalists I could be “bothered”, but was unable to travel to Tehran to actually speak to protesters face to face. Telephone and email were the only means of communication, even though their scope was limited, but that was limited because of government monitoring and the fear of arrest. Many people I spoke to asked me to call them on landlines rather than mobiles, because they believed the authorities were listening in to their conversations. Since October 2009 I have been to Iran on a number of occasions, and as most television journalists who have reported from the country will tell you, heavy restrictions apply. You need special permission for every story, which can sometimes take weeks. Being of Iranian descent makes things a little easier, especially since you can explain what you need directly, but being of dual nationality does make the authorities rather more suspicious of your intentions.

On the 31st anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, February 11th 2010, I was at the official pro-government rally in Tehran’s Azadi Square, which was broadcast on Iranian state television. All foreign journalists in Tehran at the time were given access to the event. Just by pure chance (I left before the official escort back to Northern Tehran) I ended up witnessing a number of Green protesters chanting anti government slogans, and the riot police, dressed in black with batons and tear gas canisters preparing to retaliate. I reported what I saw via telephone to Al Jazeera. NPR picked up my eyewitness account and thousands were able to hear my words. Those moments of reporting actual events from the ground in Iran are extremely rare. Foreign journalists who do not meet the set requirements, which are basically sticking with in the remits of your official permission for that particular story, will have their permission taken away by the Ministry of Information. So reporting from Iran is a real balancing act between wanting to stay while maintaining journalistic integrity.

As an international Al Jazeera reporter and presenter based in London and Doha, I can leave Iran and continue my work elsewhere. It is not so easy for those making a living in the country. There are many talented journalists, but in the end a game of balance turns into a

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<sup>24</sup> See her full article entitled “The Twitter Devolution” dated June 7, 2010 published by Foreign Policy and available at: [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/07/the\\_twitter\\_revolution\\_that\\_wasnt](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/07/the_twitter_revolution_that_wasnt) [Accessed 17 April 2011]

constant stream of self-censorship. It is more than two and half years since the unrest that gripped Iran and there has been an unprecedented crackdown by the government on all forms of media as well as freedom of speech. Despite the best efforts of the Islamic Republic, however, the information, the tweets, the video is still finding a route out of the country. Although with Tunisia, Egypt and then Libya dominating international headlines there has definitely been a marked lack of interest in Iran's internal problems. Another issue is the lack of accurate unbiased material. Like Tunisia before the uprising, the standard of journalism and balanced reporting is extremely poor. Reporters Without Borders 2010 report ranked Tunisia 164th and Iran 172nd out of 178 countries in its press freedom index. However, there are groups that are fighting back. In January 2011, Operation Tunisia, which was organised by the Internet hacking group "Anonymous", launched an attack on key Tunisian government sites.<sup>25</sup> The group said there was "an outrageous level of censorship" in the country, and targeted sites with what it called a Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks to highlight the protests. The campaign managed to knock some important government sites offline, but more importantly it highlighted what was going on around the country.<sup>26</sup>

In recent weeks there have reportedly been a number of "Anonymous" attacks on Iran's state-controlled websites and media. The group says it is fighting the regime's Internet censorship and helping Iranian activists. It is unclear how successful these attacks have been. Although new media is an important tool, I believe that Tunisia and Egypt showed the world that revolutions cannot be entirely based on this form of communication. People also need to be willing to, at times, risk their lives by coming out onto the streets. One Tunisian journalist described what happened across the country as "the death of fear". That happened in Iran as well, but the difference in Tunisia was that members of the army, respected by many Tunisians, took a crucial decision, to disobey Ben Ali's orders and not to fire on the people. Another important difference is that unlike in Iran, where reformists were the principle green activists inside the country, and were thus rounded up very easily, in Tunisia the movement did not have a central core, which could be cracked. Tunisia is now in uncharted territory, building a Constitution, a new democracy, and a more open media from scratch. These are freedoms Iranian activists can only dream of. As a television journalist born in Iran it is an extraordinary privilege to be able to witness such change. It is something I will never forget.

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<sup>25</sup> The open letter is available on-line at: <http://www.pdf-archive.com/2011/01/04/an-open-letter-to-all-media/> [Accessed 17 April 2011]

<sup>26</sup> Brigadier General Gholamreza Jalli, an IRI official affiliated with the IRGC, welcomes hackers who are willing to work with the regime to hack and bring down opposition websites, see: [http://www.rferl.org/content/iran\\_says\\_it\\_welcomes\\_hackers\\_who\\_work\\_for\\_islamic\\_republic/2330495.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/iran_says_it_welcomes_hackers_who_work_for_islamic_republic/2330495.html) [Accessed 17 April 2011]