Digital Technology, Social Media and Society

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I. Introduction

In June of 2009, the city of Tehran bore witness to a wave of protests designed to dispute the legitimacy of Iran’s recent presidential election and the concordant victory of incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The main opposition leaders – along with crowds of Iranian supporters – staged a series of demonstrations that ultimately resulted in a violent response from Ahmadinejad’s armed forces: the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and the Basij paramilitaries. In addition to the mobilization of troops, serious efforts were taken by Ahmadinejad to limit the international exposure of the incident; and in effect, international media correspondents were banned from reporting on the developing situation in the streets of Tehran (Morozov 11). In order to fill this lapse in international news coverage, social media platforms like Twitter\(^1\) played an integral role in forming and disseminating a narrative of events that soon became known as “Iran’s Twitter Revolution.”

This unique narrative presents us with a range of intriguing insights on the effects of social media on contemporary society. Having risen from relatively new forms of digital technology, social media is commonly held to be an increasingly potent force in influencing the traditional relations of media power. In one sense, it is somewhat alluring to conceptualize social media as a phenomenon that democratically reconstructs the hierarchical structure of traditional Broadcast Era media. By introducing new forms of social media into the mass media ecosystem, a certain degree of power can be said to shift away from the politically and economically vested owners of media and openly redistributed to any individual that is able to utilize a social media platform. It can further be argued that this means of “side-stepping” the traditional media structure ultimately results in a desirable change in the relations of social power for society at large.

\(^1\) Twitter is a social media network that allows users to post (or tweet) short messages up to 140 characters in length. Users can then re-post (or re-tweet) on the same topic.
By all means, it is not the aim of this essay to argue against the idea that social media can indeed bring about some degree of positive change in the functioning of society. Instead, it is my intention to outline some of the extraordinary dangers in adopting an *uncritical* view of these changes. While the benefits that arise from social media are indeed numerous, the associated threats may be equally unsettling. As the influence of new digital technology continues to grow, there is a mounting need for individuals to critically theorize and mitigate unsavory aspects of new media phenomena. Ultimately, of all the dangers posed by the continued development and integration of social media, the lack of a critical perspective may be the most serious of all.

I will begin this essay with a close-up analysis of Iran’s Twitter Revolution and the double-edged role that was played by social media platforms like Twitter. For our purposes, this section will act as a point of departure into the intricate realm of “Media Studies 2.0” and the conceptual framework of a “media supply chain” (Merrin; Brussee and Hekman). It is hoped that this section will enable us to frame a more critical view of social media, its driving forces, and some of its potential functions in society. Finally, I will consider several salient critiques of the new media ecosystem and their implications on social media in our contemporary society.

**II. Twitter: Friend or Foe?**

There are mixed feelings about the role that Twitter – and other social media platforms – played in Iran’s 2009 election crisis. On the one hand, social media enabled opposition leaders to effectively publicize and mobilize support for anti-government demonstrations. The widely accessible, grassroots characteristic of social media platforms facilitated a means of rallying like-minded individuals in a relatively low-cost, low-risk arena. In turn, stories of the protests in Tehran were broadly publicized and Iranian citizens received encouragement from a wide range of actors including: international advocates, well-wishers, and perhaps the most fascinating of all, the US Government.
On 16 June 2009, international media sources confirmed a US State Department request to delay a scheduled server upgrade of Twitter in order to allow for maximum access during this critical time (Burns and Eltham 299). Was this in fact a championship moment for social media? Burns and Eltham note that,

[This] was the first time that a US government agency explicitly acknowledged the potential role of social media platforms in an international event… [And furthermore], the consensus among journalists at The New York Times, The Washington Post, Businessweek and Time, was that Twitter represented a new and influential medium for social movements and international politics. (299)

But while the proponents of social media wistfully focus on the prospect of supporting the democracy-enhancing goals of Iranian protesters, critics often retort with strong arguments against these idealistic narratives. At first glance, it may seem that social media has indeed served a great function in the Iranian context, but it is crucial for individuals to look at this issue from a series of critical angles.

Morozov argues that the role of technology in driving the Iranian protests still remains relatively ambiguous. Furthermore, he claims that the perceived utility of platforms like Twitter may have been over-amplified by international followers of social media (Morozov 10). A widespread unfamiliarity with Iranian internet culture, language and society make it “quite easy to dismiss the Twitter Revolution as a product of the wild imagination – or, perhaps the excessive optimism – of our self-anointed Internet gurus and visionaries” (Morozov 10). After all, when we factor in the degree to which international onlookers were able to follow English-speaking Iranian bloggers – who likely came from the small minority\(^2\) of privileged, internet literate citizens in Iran – it is certainly conceivable that a somewhat skewed picture of the events in Tehran may have presented itself (Morozov 11). Indeed, social media may have served

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\(^2\) According to Morozov, the estimated number of Twitter users in Iran before the protests was about twenty thousand out of a total population of more than seventy million (Morozov 12).
some tangible function for anti-government protesters, but it seems that function may have been quite unlike what most international observers were inclined to believe at the time.

Regardless, there is still another highly relevant angle to consider in this narrative: the utilization of social media platforms by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Basij paramilitaries to track down opposition leaders and gather intelligence on anti-government support networks. Morozov reminds of us a time when regimes would have resorted to torture in order to get this kind of special intelligence on anti-government networks; but instead, with the advent of social media, “these details are now being shared voluntary, without any external pressure whatsoever” (Morozov 12). If we are to believe that Twitter did in fact prove to be a useful tool in rallying anti-government protesters, it would be foolhardy for us to overlook the fact that Twitter may have been just as useful for Ahmadinejad’s armed forces.

Ultimately, Burns and Eltham prudently remind us that,

The societal diffusion of a new technology platform inevitably means that different actors will exploit if for unintended uses, tactical advantages, and ‘systematic learning’… Those who believe Twitter and other social network technologies will enable ordinary people to seize power from repressive regimes should consider the fate of Iran’s protestors, some of whom paid for their enthusiastic adoption of Twitter with their lives. (306)

In the end, it is important to keep in mind that: despite the presence of social media, anti-government protesters were ultimately unable to meaningfully disrupt Ahmadinejad’s contested victory. Given the unclear nature of these events, it has proven to be exceedingly difficult to argue decisively for either side of the debate on Twitter’s role in these events. However, what is clear is that there are a great number of conflicting forces at work, and a useful analysis of these forces effectively requires us to adopt a highly critical view of social media.

So what exactly are these new media forces; how do they differ from more traditional frameworks; and what are the greater implications for society?
III. Changes to Mass Media and the Development of Media Studies 2.0

Part of the problem concerning analyses of social media has to do with the lack of relevant approaches. With the sustained development of new digital technologies, it is becoming more and more apparent that traditional approaches to Media Studies may be theoretically insufficient in addressing social media processes. In light of these shortcomings, efforts have been taken to “upgrade” Media Studies in a way that can leave the field more competent towards digital technology and changing media relations. The product of these efforts has assumed the name Media Studies 2.0 (MS2.0). Before an attempt can be made to theorize social media relations within the framework of MS2.0, it is necessary to first consider some important points concerning its predecessor – Broadcast Era Media Studies or (in keeping consistent with the terminology) MS1.0.

Merrin explains that “Media Studies 1.0 was an academic product of the Broadcasting Era. It developed out of a concern with mass society, mass communication, mass persuasion and the formation and control of public opinion” (Merrin 20). It sought to analyze an era in which newspapers, radio, cinema, music and television were purposefully developed for mass consumption; and as a corollary effect, economic and political relations of power were increasingly entrenched in the hands of a select group of media elites. Broadcast Era media relations presupposed a one-way flow of information – from the controllers of media to the masses – and in turn, these relations were subject to an array of fierce criticisms alleging pessimistic themes of commodification and mass domination through the consolidated control of major media sources. But with the arrival of more affordable, more influential and more socially integrated forms of digital technology, the traditional Broadcast Era media ecosystem experienced some significant changes. Merrin points out that “almost every ‘old’ broadcast-era medium has been transformed in their production, distribution, reception or use by digital technology, as have all existing technological, institutional, political and economic media structures” (Merrin 18). Coupled with

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3 A great number of these critiques originated from the critical scholars of the Frankfurt school of thought. For a good example see The Culture Industry in (Horkheimer, Max and Theodore Adorno. The Dialectic of Enlightenment. New York: Herder and Herder 1972)
the way “users are reconfiguring their own social relations and expectations,” entirely new modes of
total new modes of experience and knowledge formation are being produced (Merrin 18). So what exactly is MS2.0 and how
is it adapting to the technological changes of this digital era?

MS2.0 is a qualitatively different approach to the study of media. According to Merrin, “MS2.0 is a reflection of a changed media environment, exploring the post-broadcast digital era and its implications” (Merrin 27). It involves a rethinking of “the content, categories and concepts of Broadcast Era media studies” and the development of “new classification systems and new concepts, categories and ideas to understand them” (Merrin 28). MS2.0 is not an open rejection of Broadcast Era media forms, nor is it an unjustified celebration of new media developments; instead, it represents a new method of theorizing digitally powered media relations (Merrin 25). Most notably, MS2.0 encompasses: (i) a blurring of the places “where we can encounter, interact with and contribute to media content”; (ii) a collapsing of “the separate categories of ‘producer’ and ‘audience’”; and (iii) “a turn away from ‘professional’ media productions, towards the everyday participatory and creative possibilities of media” (Gauntlett 149). By adopting this “upgraded” approach to Media Studies, new and valuable insights on the effects of social media can be realized.

Brussee and Hekman present us with a useful way of conceptualizing social media relations in the form of a “media supply chain.” This model describes a four step process in the development of media content: creation, aggregation, distribution, and consumption. The first stage of this chain involves the creation of media content itself; next, “content is collected, packed and branded into a marketable media product or service”; following this, media content is delivered to media consumers; and finally, the content itself is consumed (Brussee and Hekman 2). Traditionally, within a Broadcast Era media framework, these four stages stayed relatively exclusive. Each of the categories implicitly involved specific actors fulfilling specific roles and there were strong barriers preventing fluid movement between the four categories. Brussee and Hekman point out that the Aggregation and Distribution stages were
specially organized to be highly selective; and as a result, this added to the rigid, hierarchal formation of the highly criticized Broadcast Era media relations (Brussee and Hekman 3).

Following the development and expansion of digital technology – particularly through the reduced cost and greater availability of the Internet – the media supply chain experienced two significant changes. First, barriers to the aggregation and distribution stages of production have been dramatically reduced; and second, individuals who traditionally filled the role of media consumers are now also able to fill the role of media producers (Brussee and Hekman 4). Given these changes, individuals can now produce, consume, package and distribute high volumes of media content through a variety of social media platforms. And furthermore, it is no longer necessary for user-generated media content to fall under the restrictions of the traditional mass media gatekeepers. In this sense, social media and digital technology have had quite significant effects on the conventional functions of media power; however, it is crucial for us to keep in mind that the realization of these changes does not necessarily entail a desirable change in the more general relations of social power. In fact, there are good reasons to believe that despite the new changes to the media ecosystem, many of the criticisms that were made against more traditional forms of Broadcast Era mass media are still very salient in analyses of social power.

IV. Critical Media Studies 2.0 and the Corporate Colonization of Cyberspace

In outlining a field of “Critical Media Studies 2.0,” Andrejevic argues that it is not simply a question of asserting that “everything has changed,” but rather to explain why, even in the face of dramatic technological transformation, social relations remain largely unaltered” (Andrejevic 35). It seems that there are two fundamentally fallacious premises that lie at the heart of many social media misconceptions. First, there is the mistaken idea that interactivity – as a product of new digital technology and socially accessible media – is inherently political and democratically empowering. Second, there is the equally misguided idea that social media – as a fundamentally democratic phenomenon – exists entirely outside the realm of corporate control. Both of these claims seem to be
somewhat plausible *prima facie*, yet, upon closer inspection neither seems to hold entirely true. Before we can hope to develop effective strategies of mitigation, a critical analysis of the problems posed by new digital technology and social media must take precedence.

Implicit within its restructured framework of media relations, it can be argued that social media gives almost any individual the power to effectively challenge mainstream discourses. In turn, many critics of traditional mass-media relations would hold this to be a democracy-enhancing quality. However; in contrast to this view, Andrejevic notes that digital interactivity via the Internet may make it possible to “talk back, to question, to circulate counter-narratives and consequently counter dominant narratives;” but, this does not necessarily translate to a politically and democratically empowering situation in society (Andrejevic 39). In cases where the “reproduction of social relations relies solely on the unquestioned reproduction of such narratives,” the ability to talk back may indeed prove to be a force of empowerment; however, “when the exercise of certain forms of political power relies on mobilization and co-optation of such critical strategies, the political potential of such forms of interactivity is at best ambivalent” (Andrejevic 39). In other words, the possibility of challenging mainstream discourses cannot be said to necessarily imply political or democratic empowerment precisely because of the adaptive nature of political power and the concordant lack of necessary or effective participation. New social media relations have given rise to new forms of political co-optation and the utilization of social media platforms does not essentially imply constructive civic involvement in a democratic sense. An increased degree of interactivity may not prove to be politically disparaging per se, but interactivity isn’t inherently political and “it needs to be made political if it is to live up to its promised potential” (Andrejevic 35).

In a similar sense, it may be quite appealing for us to imagine the Internet as a “*virtual commons*” or “*online agora*” in which individuals are free to openly interact, unhindered by the corporate structure of traditional media relations (Milberry and Anderson; Andrejevic). But despite the romantic promise of circumventing corporate media power, digital technology and social media may just be restructuring the ways in which individuals experience social domination. Milberry and Anderson note an increasing trend
in the privatization of cyberspace by “major online property holders such as Google and Facebook” (Milberry and Anderson 398). As new forms of digital technology and social media continue to diffuse throughout society, “major Web companies are finding new and evermore invasive ways to sell our attention to advertisers and marketers” (Milberry and Anderson 398). Profits can then be mobilized to acquire new types of online property and networks of “tightly integrated, mutually reinforcing cyber-enclosures begin to emerge” (Milberry and Anderson 399). By locking users into these corporatized networks of online service platforms, major Web companies are persistently gaining influence in ways that may not be immediately obvious to uncritical users of digital technology and social media. One simply needs to consider the extent to which a company like Google can influence users to virtually navigate its own extensive network of online assets. These new relations of power ultimately raise more serious questions concerning the way major Web companies will be able to exercise social control over the ever-increasing number of individual users. In this sense, traditional mass media critiques may hold more significance in the digital era than they have been given credit for.

V. Concluding Thoughts

Given its still youthful age and incredible potential for change, the only thing certain about social media, is the ambiguity of its future functions. If we are to accept the idea that social media has fundamentally altered the traditional relations of media power, we must also recognize its potential for altering relations of social power. Throughout the course of this essay I have attempted to show some of the potential dangers in taking an uncritical view of social media. While it may be tempting to focus solely on positive aspects of change, there is a dire need for individuals to equally consider some of the associated aspects of negative change. Ultimately, if individuals are unable to adopt a critical approach in theorizing the effects of social media on society, there will be no hope of solving any of the associated problems that may arise in the near future.
Works Cited


