

## The Google Doctrine



In June 2009 thousands of young Iranians—smartphones in their hands (and, for the more advanced, Bluetooth headsets in their ears)—poured into the stuffy streets of Tehran to protest what they believed to be a fraudulent election. Tensions ran high, and some protesters, in an unthinkable offense, called for the resignation of Ayatollah Khamenei. But many Iranians found the elections to be fair; they were willing to defend the incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad if needed. Iranian society, buffeted by the conflicting forces of populism, conservatism, and modernity, was facing its most serious political crisis since the 1979 revolution that ended the much-disliked reign of the pro-American Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

But this was not the story that most Western media chose to prioritize; instead, they preferred to muse on how the Internet was ushering in democracy into the country. “The Revolution Will Be Twittered” was the first in a series of blog posts published by the *Atlantic’s* Andrew Sullivan a few hours after the news of the protests broke. In it, Sullivan zeroed in on the resilience of the popular microblogging site Twitter, arguing that “as the regime shut down other forms of communication,

Twitter survived. With some remarkable results." In a later post, even though the "remarkable results" were still nowhere to be seen, Sullivan proclaimed Twitter to be "the critical tool for organizing the resistance in Iran" but didn't bother to quote any evidence to support his claim. Only a few hours after the protests began, his blog emerged as a major information hub that provided almost instantaneous links to Iran-related developments. Thousands of readers who didn't have the stamina to browse hundreds of news sites saw events unfolding in Iran primarily through Sullivan's eyes. (And, as it turned out, his were a rather optimistic pair.)

It didn't take long for Sullivan's version of events to gain hold elsewhere in the blogosphere—and soon enough, in the traditional media as well. Michelle Malkin, the right-wing blogging diva, suggested that "in the hands of freedom-loving dissidents, the micro-blogging social network is a revolutionary samizdat—undermining the mullah-crazy's information blockades one Tweet at a time." Marc Ambinder, Sullivan's colleague at the *Atlantic*, jumped on the bandwagon, too; for him, Twitter was so important that he had to invent a new word, "protagonal," to describe it. "When histories of the Iranian election are written, Twitter will doubtless be cast a protagonal technology that enabled the powerless to survive a brutal crackdown," wrote Ambinder on his blog. The *Wall Street Journal's* Yochi Dreazen proclaimed that "this [revolution] would not happen without Twitter," while National Public Radio's Daniel Schorr announced that "in Iran, tyranny has run afoul of technology in the form of the Internet, turning a protest into a movement." When Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times* asserted that in "the quintessential 21st-century conflict . . . on one side are government thugs firing bullets . . . [and] on the other side are young protesters firing 'tweets,'" he was simply registering the zeitgeist.

Soon technology pundits, excited that their favorite tool was all over the media, were on the case as well. "This is it. The big one. This is the first revolution that has been catapulted onto a global stage and transformed by social media," proclaimed New York University's Clay Shirky in an interview with TED.com. Jonathan Zittrain, a Harvard academic and the author of *The Future of the Internet and How to Stop It*, alleged

that "Twitter, in particular, has proven particularly adept at organizing people and information." John Gapper, a business columnist for the *Financial Times*, opined that Twitter was "the tinderbox that fanned the spark of revolt among supporters of Mir-Hossein Mousavi." Even the usually sober *Christian Science Monitor* joined in the cyber-celebrations, noting that "the government's tight control of the Internet has spawned a generation adept at circumventing cyber road blocks, making the country ripe for a technology-driven protest movement."<sup>\*</sup>

Twitter seemed omnipotent—certainly more so than the Iranian police, the United Nations, the U.S. government, and the European Union. Not only would it help to rid Iran of its despicable leader but also convince ordinary Iranians, most of whom vehemently support the government's aggressive pursuit of nuclear enrichment, that they should stop their perpetual fretting about Israel and simply go back to being their usual peaceful selves. A column in the right-wing *Human Events* declared that Twitter had accomplished "what neither the U.N. nor the European Union have [*sic*] been able to do," calling it "a huge threat to the Iranian regime—a pro-liberty movement being fomented and organized in short sentences." Likewise, the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal* argued that "the Twitter-powered 'Green Revolution' in Iran . . . has used social-networking technology to do more for regime change in the Islamic Republic than years of sanctions, threats and Geneva-based haggling put together." It seemed that Twitter was improving not only democracy but diplomacy as well.

Soon enough, pundits began using the profusion of Iranian tweets as something of an excuse to draw far-reaching conclusions about the future of the world in general. To many, Iran's Twitter-inspired protests clearly indicated that authoritarianism was doomed everywhere. In a

<sup>\*</sup> A confession is in order here: I was one of the first to fall into the Twitter Revolution trap, christening similar youth protests in Moldova, which happened a few months before Iran's, with what proved to be that sticky and extremely misleading moniker. Even though I quickly qualified it with a long and nuanced explanation, it is certainly not the proudest moment in my career, especially as all those nuances were lost on most media covering the events.

column modestly entitled "Tyranny's New Nightmare: Twitter," *Los Angeles Times* writer Tim Rutten declared that "as new media spreads its Web worldwide, authoritarians like those in Iran will have a difficult time maintaining absolute control in the face of the technology's chaotic democracy." That the Green Movement was quickly disintegrating and was unable to mount a serious challenge to Ahmadinejad didn't prevent the editorial page of the *Baltimore Sun* from concluding that the Internet was making the world safer and more democratic: "The belief that activists are blogging their lives away while governments and corporations take greater control of the world is being proven false with every tweet, every blog comment, every protest planned on Facebook."

Inspired by similar logic, Mark Pfeiffe, former deputy national security advisor in the George W. Bush administration, launched a public campaign to nominate Twitter for the Nobel Peace Prize, arguing that "without Twitter, the people of Iran would not have felt empowered and confident to stand up for freedom and democracy." The Webby Awards, the Internet's equivalent of the Oscars, hailed the Iranian protests as "one of the top ten Internet moments of the decade." (The Iranian youths—or, rather, their smartphones—were in good company: The expansion of Craigslist beyond San Francisco in 2000 and the launch of Google AdWords in 2004 were among other honorees.)

But it was Gordon Brown, then the prime minister of the United Kingdom, who drew the most ridiculous conclusion from the events in Iran. "You cannot have Rwanda again because information would come out far more quickly about what is actually going on and the public opinion would grow to the point where action would need to be taken," he argued. "This week's events in Iran are a reminder of the way that people are using new technology to come together in new ways to make their views known." On Brown's logic, the millions who poured into the streets of London, New York, Rome, and other cities on February 15, 2003, to protest the impending onset of the Iraq War made one silly mistake: They didn't blog enough about it. *That* would have definitely prevented the bloodbath.

## Hail the Google Doctrine

Iran's seemed like a revolution that the whole world was not just watching but also blogging, tweeting, Googling, and YouTubeing. It only took a few clicks to get bombarded by links that seemed to shed more light on events in Iran—quantitatively, if not qualitatively—than anything carried by what technologists like to condescendingly call "legacy media." While the latter, at least in their rare punditry-free moments of serenity, were still trying to provide some minimal context to the Iranian protests, many Internet users preferred to simply get the raw deal on Twitter, gorging on as many videos, photos, and tweets as they could stomach. Such virtual proximity to events in Tehran, abetted by access to the highly emotional photos and videos shot by protesters themselves, led to unprecedented levels of global empathy with the cause of the Green Movement. But in doing so, such networked intimacy may have also greatly inflated popular expectations of what it could actually achieve.

As the Green Movement lost much of its momentum in the months following the election, it became clear that the Twitter Revolution, so many in the West were quick to inaugurate was nothing more than a wild fantasy. And yet it still can boast of at least one unambiguous accomplishment: If anything, Iran's Twitter Revolution revealed the intense Western longing for a world where information technology is the liberator rather than the oppressor, a world where technology could be harvested to spread democracy around the globe rather than entrench existing autocracies. The irrational exuberance that marked the Western interpretation of what was happening in Iran suggests that the green-clad youngsters tweeting in the name of freedom nicely fit into some preexisting mental schema that left little room for nuanced interpretation, let alone skepticism about the actual role the Internet played at the time.

The fervent conviction that given enough gadgets, connectivity, and foreign funding, dictatorships are doomed, which so powerfully manifested itself during the Iranian protests, reveals the pervasive influence

of the Google Doctrine. But while the manic surrounding Iran's Twitter Revolution helped to crystallize the main tenets of the doctrine, it did not beget those tenets. In fact, the Google Doctrine has a much finer intellectual pedigree—much of it rooted in the history of the Cold War—than many of its youthful proponents realize. The Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman was already warning about such premature triumphalism back in 1999 when he ridiculed its core beliefs in a book review. Ironically enough, the book was by Tom Friedman, his future fellow *New York Times* columnist. According to Krugman, too many Western observers, with Friedman as their cheerleader in chief, were falling under the false impression that thanks to advances in information technology “old-fashioned power politics is becoming increasingly obsolete, because it conflicts with the imperatives of global capitalism.” Invariably they were reaching the excessively optimistic conclusion that “we are heading for a world that is basically democratic, because you can't keep 'em down on the farm once they have Internet access, and basically peaceful, because George Soros will pull out his money if you rattle your saber.” And in a world like this, how can anything but democracy triumph in the long run?

As such, the Google Doctrine owes less to the advent of tweeting and social networking than it does to the giddy sense of superiority that many in the West felt in 1989, as the Soviet system collapsed almost overnight. As history was supposed to be ending, democracy was quickly pronounced the only game in town. Technology, with its unique ability to fuel consumerist zeal—itself seen as a threat to any authoritarian regime—as well as its prowess to awaken and mobilize the masses against their rulers, was thought to be the ultimate liberator. There is a good reason why one of the chapters in Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and The Last Man*, the ur-text of the early 1990s that successfully bridged the worlds of positive psychology and foreign affairs, was titled “The Victory of the VCR.”

The ambiguity surrounding the end of the Cold War made such arguments look far more persuasive than any close examination of their theoretical strengths would warrant. While many scholars took it to mean that the austere logic of Soviet-style communism, with its five-

year plans and constant shortages of toilet paper, had simply run its course, most popular interpretations downplayed the structural deficiencies of the Soviet regime—who would want to acknowledge that the Evil Empire was only a bad joke?—preferring to emphasize the momentous achievements of the dissident movement, armed and nurtured by the West, in its struggle against a ruthless totalitarian adversary. According to this view, without the prohibited samizdat materials, photocopiers, and fax machines that were smuggled into the Soviet bloc, the Berlin Wall might have still been with us today. Once the Soviet Union's VCR movement had arrived, communism was untenable.

The two decades that followed were a mixed bag. VCR moments were soon superseded by DVD moments, and yet such impressive breakthroughs in technology failed to bring on any impressive breakthroughs in democratization. Some authoritarian regimes, like those in Slovakia and Serbia, fell. Others, like in Belarus and Kazakhstan, only got stronger. In addition, the tragedy of 9/11 seemed to suggest that history was returning from its protracted holiday in Florida and that another ubiquitous and equally reductionist thesis of the early 1990s, that of the clash of civilizations, would come to dominate the intellectual agenda of the new century. As a result, many of the once popular arguments about the liberating power of consumerism and technology faded from public view. That Al-Qaeda seemed to be as proficient in using the Internet as its Western opponents did not chime well with a view that treated technology as democracy's best friend. The dotcom crash of 2000 also reduced the fanatical enthusiasm over the revolutionary nature of new technologies: the only things falling under the pressure of the Internet were stock markets, not authoritarian regimes.

But as the Iranian events of 2009 have so clearly demonstrated, the Google Doctrine was simply put on the backburner; it did not collapse. The sighting of pro-democratic Iranians caught in a tight embrace with Twitter, a technology that many Westerners previously saw as a rather peculiar way to share one's breakfast plans, was enough to fully rehabilitate its core principles and even update them with a fancier Web 2.0 vocabulary. The almost-forgotten theory that people, once armed with a powerful technology, would triumph over the most brutal

adversaries—regardless of what gas and oil prices are at the time—was suddenly enjoying an unexpected intellectual renaissance.

Had the Iranian protests succeeded, it seems fairly certain that “The Victory of Tweets” would be too good of a chapter title to go to waste. Indeed, at some point in June 2009, if only for a brief moment, it seemed as if history might be repeating itself, ridding the West of yet another archenemy—and the one with dangerous nuclear ambitions. After all, the streets of Tehran in the summer of 2009 looked much like those of Leipzig, Warsaw, or Prague in the fall of 1989. Back in ’89, few in the West had the guts or the imagination to believe that such a brutal system—a system that always seemed so invulnerable and determined to live—could fall apart so peacefully. Iran, it seemed, was giving Western observers the long-awaited chance to redeem themselves over their dismal performance in 1989 and embrace the Hegelian spirit of history before it had fully manifested itself.

Whatever the political and cultural differences between the crowds that were rocking Iran in 2009 and the crowds that rocked Eastern Europe in 1989, both cases seemed to share at least one common feature: a heavy reliance on technology. Those in the streets of Eastern Europe did not yet have BlackBerries and iPhones, but their fight was, nevertheless, abetted by technologies of a different, mostly analogue variety: photocopiers and fax machines, radios tuned to Radio Free Europe and Voice of America, video cameras of Western television crews. And while in 1989 few outsiders could obtain immediate access to the most popular antigovernment leaflets or flip through clandestine photos of police brutality, in 2009 one could follow the Iranian protests pretty much the same way one could follow the Super Bowl or the Grammys: by refreshing one’s Twitter page. Thus, any seasoned observers of foreign affairs—and particularly those who had a chance to compare what they saw in 1989 to what they were seeing in 2009—knew, if only intuitively, that the early signs coming from the streets of Tehran seemed to vindicate the Google Doctrine. With that in mind, conclusions about the inevitable collapse of the Iranian regime did not seem so far-fetched. Only a lazy pundit would not have pronounced Iran’s Twitter

Revolution a success when all the signs were suggesting the inevitability of Ahmadinejad’s collapse.

### The Unimaginable Consequences of an Imagined Revolution

It must have been similar reasoning—at times bordering on hubris—that led American diplomats to commit a terrible policy blunder at the height of the Iranian protests. Swayed by the monotony of media commentary, the flood of Iran-related messages on Twitter, or his own institutional and professional agendas, a senior official at the U.S. State Department sent an email to executives at Twitter, inquiring if they could reschedule the previously planned—and now extremely ill-timed—maintenance of the site, so as not to disrupt the Iranian protests. Twitter’s management complied but publicly emphasized that they reached that decision independently.

The historic significance of what may have seemed like a simple email was not lost on the *New York Times*, which described it as “another new-media milestone” for the Obama administration, attesting to “the recognition by the United States government that an Internet blogging service that did not exist four years ago has the potential to change history in an ancient Islamic country.” The *New York Times* may have exaggerated the amount of deliberation that the Obama administration invested in the issue (a White House spokesman immediately downplayed the significance of the “milestone” by claiming that “this wasn’t a directive from Secretary of State, but rather was a low-level contact from someone who often talks to Twitter staff”), but the Gray Lady was spot on in assessing its overall importance.

Contrary to Marc Ambinder’s prediction, when future historians look at what happened in those few hot weeks in June 2009, that email correspondence—which the State Department chose to widely publicize to bolster its own new media credentials—is likely to be of far greater importance than anything the Green Movement actually did on the Internet. Regardless of the immediate fate of democracy in Iran,

the world is poised to feel the impact of that symbolic communication for years to come.

For the Iranian authorities, such contact between its sworn enemies in the U.S. government and a Silicon Valley firm providing online services that, at least as the Western media described it, were beloved by their citizens quickly gave rise to suspicions that the Internet is an instrument of Western power and that its ultimate end is to foster regime change in Iran. Suddenly, the Iranian authorities no longer saw the Internet as an engine of economic growth or as a way to spread the word of the prophet. All that mattered at the time was that the Web presented an unambiguous threat that many of Iran's enemies would be sure to exploit. Not surprisingly, once the protests quieted down, the Iranian authorities embarked on a digital purge of their opponents.

In just a few months, the Iranian government formed a high-level twelve-member cybercrime team and tasked it with finding any false information—or, as they put it, “insults and lies”—on Iranian websites. Those spreading false information were to be identified and arrested. The Iranian police began hunting the Internet for photos and videos that showed faces of the protesters—numerous, thanks to the ubiquity of social media—to publish them on Iranian news media websites and ask the public for help in identifying the individuals. In December 2009 the pro-Ahmadinejad *Raja News* website published a batch of thirty-eight photos with sixty-five faces circled in red and a batch of forty-seven photos with about a hundred faces circled in red. According to the Iranian police, public tip-offs helped to identify and arrest at least forty people. Ahmadinejad's supporters may have also produced a few videos of their own, including a clip—which many in the opposition believed to be a montage—that depicted a group of protesters burning a portrait of Ayatollah Khomeini. If people had believed that the footage was genuine, it could have created a major split in the opposition, alienating vast swathes of the Iranian population.

The police or someone acting on their behalf also went searching for personal details—mostly Facebook profiles and email addresses—of Iranians living abroad, sending them threatening messages and urging them not to support the Green Movement unless they wanted to

hurt their relatives back in Iran. In the meantime, the authorities were equally tough on Iranians in the country, warning them to stay away from social networking sites used by the opposition. The country's police chief Gen. Ismail Ahmadi Moghaddam warned that those who incited others to protest or issued appeals “have committed a worse crime than those who come to the streets.” Passport control officers at Tehran's airport asked Iranians living abroad if they had Facebook accounts; they would often double-check online, regardless of the answer, and proceed to write down any suspicious-looking online friends a traveler might have.

The authorities, however, did not dismiss technology outright. They, too, were more than happy to harvest its benefits. They turned to text messaging—on a rather massive scale—to warn Iranians to stay away from street protests in the future. One such message, sent by the intelligence ministry, was anything but friendly: “Dear citizen, according to received information, you have been influenced by the destabilizing propaganda which the media affiliated with foreign countries have been disseminating. In case of any illegal action and contact with the foreign media, you will be charged as a criminal consistent with the Islamic Punishment Act and dealt with by the Judiciary.”

In the eyes of the Iranian government, the Western media was guilty of more than spreading propaganda; they accused CNN of “training hackers” after the channel reported on various cyber-attacks that Ahmadinejad's opponents were launching on websites deemed loyal to his campaign. Recognizing that the enemy was winning the battle in the virtual world, one ayatollah eventually allowed pious Iranians to use any tool, even if it contravened Shari'a law, in their online fight. “In a war, anti-Shari'a [moves] are permissible; the same applies to a cyberwar. The conditions are such that you should fight the enemy in any way you can. You don't need to be considerate of anyone. If you don't hit them, the enemy will hit you,” proclaimed Ayatollah Alam Ahdi during a Friday Prayer sermon in 2010.

But the campaign against CNN was a drop in the sea compared to the accusations launched against Twitter, which the pro-Ahmadinejad Iranian media immediately took to be the real source of unrest in the

country. An editorial in *Javan*, a hard-line Iranian newspaper, accused the U.S. State Department of trying to foment a revolution via the Internet by helping Twitter stay online, stressing its “effective role in the continuation of riots.” Given the previous history of American interference in the country’s affairs—most Iranians still fret about the 1953 coup masterminded by the CIA—such accusations are likely to stick, painting all Twitter users as a secret American revolutionary vanguard. In contrast to the tumultuous events of 1953, the Twitter Revolution did not seem to have its Kermit Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt’s grandson and the coordinator of CIA’s Operation Ajax, which resulted in the overthrow of the nationalist government of Mohammad Mosaddegh. But in the eyes of the Iranian authorities the fact that today’s digital vanguards have no obvious charismatic coordinators only made them seem more dangerous. (The Iranian propaganda officials could not contain their glee when they discovered that Kermit Roosevelt was a close relative of John Palfrey, the faculty codirector of Harvard’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society, a think tank that the U.S. State Department had funded to study the Iranian blogosphere.)

Other governments also took notice, perhaps out of fear that they, too, might soon have a Twitter Revolution on their hands. Chinese authorities interpreted Washington’s involvement in Iran as a warning sign that digital revolutions facilitated by American technology companies are not spontaneous but carefully staged affairs. “How did the unrest after the Iranian elections come about?” pondered an editorial in the *People’s Daily*, the chief mouthpiece of the Communist Party. “It was because online warfare launched by America, via YouTube video and Twitter microblogging, spread rumors, created splits, stirred up, and sowed discord between the followers of conservative reformist factions.” Another major outlet of government propaganda, Xinhua News Agency, took a more philosophical view, announcing that “information technology that has brought mankind all kinds of benefits has this time become a tool for interfering in the internal affairs of other countries.”

A few months after the Iranian protests, *China National Defense*, an official outlet of the Chinese military, ran a similar editorial, lumping April 2010 youth protests in Moldova with those of Iran and treating

both as prime examples of Internet-enabled foreign intervention. The editorial, singling out the United States as the “keenest Western power to add the internet to its diplomatic arsenal,” also linked those two protests to an ethnic uprising in China’s own Xinjiang province in July 2009, concluding that more Internet control was in order, if only “to avoid the internet becoming a new poisoned arrow for hostile forces.” Bizarrely, the irresponsible Iran-related punditry in Washington allowed leaders in Beijing to build a credible case for more Internet censorship in China. (The online blockade of the Xinjiang region only ended in early 2010.)

Media in the former Soviet Union took notice as well. “The Demonstrations in Iran Followed the Moldovan Scenario: The U.S. Got Burnt” proclaimed a headline on a Russian nationalist portal. A prime-time news program on the popular Russian TV channel NTV announced that the “Iranian protesters were enjoying the support of the U.S. State Department, which interfered in the internal activities of Twitter, a trendy Internet service.” A newspaper in Moldova reported that the U.S. government even supplied Twitter with cutting-edge anticensorship technology.

This was globalization at its worst: A simple email based on the premise that Twitter mattered in Iran, sent by an American diplomat in Washington to an American company in San Francisco, triggered a worldwide Internet panic and politicized all online activity, painting it in bright revolutionary colors and threatening to tighten online spaces and opportunities that were previously unregulated. Instead of finding ways to establish long-term relationships with Iranian bloggers and use their work to quietly push for social, cultural, and—at some distant point in the future—maybe even political change, the American foreign policy establishment went on the record and pronounced them to be more dangerous than Lenin and Che Guevara combined. As a result, many of these “dangerous revolutionaries” were jailed, many more were put under secret surveillance, and those poor Iranian activists who happened to be attending Internet trainings funded by the U.S. State Department during the election could not return home and had to apply for asylum. (At least five such individuals got trapped in Europe.) The

pundits were right: Iran's Twitter Revolution did have global repercussions. Those were, however, extremely ambiguous, and they often strengthened rather than undermined the authoritarian rule.

### A Revolution in Search of Revolutionaries

Of course, American diplomats had no idea how the Iranian protests would turn out; it would be unfair to blame them for the apparent inability of the Green Movement to unseat Ahmadinejad. When the future of Iranian democracy depended on the benevolence of a Silicon Valley start-up that seemed oblivious to the geopolitical problems besetting the world, what other choice did they have but to intervene? Given what was at stake, isn't it preposterous to quibble about angry editorials in Moldovan newspapers that may have appeared even if the State Department stayed on the sidelines?

All of this is true—as long as there is evidence to assert that the situation was, indeed, dramatic. Should it prove lacking or inconclusive, American diplomats deserve more than a mere spanking. There is absolutely no excuse for giving the air of intervening into internal affairs of either private companies or foreign governments while, in reality, Western policymakers are simply standing in the corner, daydreaming about democracy and babbling their wildest fantasies into an open mic. In most cases, such “interventions” right no wrongs; instead they usually create quite a few wrongs of their own, producing unnecessary risks for those who were naïve enough to think of the U.S. government as a serious and reliable partner. American pundits go to talk shows; Iranian bloggers go to prison. The bold request sent to Twitter by the U.S. State Department could only be justified on the condition that Twitter was, indeed, playing a crucial role in the Iranian unrest and that the cause of Iranian democracy would be severely undermined had the site gone into maintenance mode for a few hours.

None of this seems to be the case. The digital witch hunts put on by the Iranian government may have been targeting imaginary enemies, created in part by the worst excesses of Western media and the hubris of Western policymakers. Two uncertainties remain to this day. First,

how many people inside Iran (as opposed to those outside) were tweeting about the protests? Second, was Twitter actually used as a key tool for organizing the protests, as many pundits implied, or was its relevance limited only to sharing news and raising global awareness about what was happening?

On the first question, the evidence is at best inconclusive. There were indeed a lot of Iran-related tweets in the two weeks following the election, but it is impossible to say how many of them came from Iran as opposed to, say, its three-million-strong diaspora, sympathizers of the Green Movement elsewhere, and provocateurs loyal to the Iranian regime. Analysis by Sysomos, a social media analysis company, found only 19,235 Twitter accounts registered in Iran (0.027 percent of the population) on the eve of the 2009 elections. As many sympathizers of the Green Movement began changing their Twitter location status to Tehran to confuse the Iranian authorities, it also became nearly impossible to tell whether the people supposedly “tweeting” from Iran were in Tehran or in, say, Los Angeles. One of the most active Twitter users sharing the news about the protests, “oxfordgirl,” was an Iranian journalist residing in the English county of Oxfordshire. She did an excellent job—but only as an information hub.

Speaking in early 2010, Moeed Ahmad, director of new media for Al-Jazeera, stated that fact-checking by his channel during the protests could confirm only sixty active Twitter accounts in Tehran, a number that fell to six once the Iranian authorities cracked down on online communications. This is not to understate the overall prominence of Iran-related news on Twitter in the first week of protests; research by Pew Research Center found that 98 percent of all the most popular links shared on the site during that period were Iran-related. It's just that the vast majority of them were not authored or retweeted by those in Iran.

As for the second question, whether Twitter was actually used to organize rather than simply publicize the protests, there is even less certainty. Many people who speak Farsi and who have followed the Iranian blogosphere over the years are far more doubtful than outside observers. A prominent Iranian blogger and activist known as Vahid Online, who was in Tehran during the protests, doubts the validity of the

Twitter Revolution thesis simply because few Iranians were tweeting. “Twitter never became very popular in Iran. [But] because the world was watching Iran with such [great interest] during those days, it led many to believe falsely that Iranian people were also getting their news through Twitter,” says the blogger.

Twitter was used to post updates about the time and venue of the protests, but it’s not clear whether this was done systematically and whether it actually brought in any new crowds onto the streets. That the Green Movement strategically chose Twitter—or, for that matter, any other Internet technology—as their favorite tool of communication is most likely just another myth. On the contrary, the Iranian opposition did not seem to be well-organized, which might explain why it eventually fizzled. “From the beginning, the Green Movement was not created and did not move forward [in an organized manner]—it wasn’t like some made a decision and informed others. When you’d walk in the streets, at work, wherever you’d go, people were talking about it and they all wanted to react,” says another prominent Iranian blogger, Alireza Rezaei.

The West, however, wasn’t hallucinating. Tweets did get sent, and crowds did gather in the streets. This does not necessarily mean, however, that there was a causal link between the two. To put it more metaphorically: If a tree falls in the forest and everyone tweets about it, it may not be the tweets that moved it. Besides, the location and timing of protests were not exactly a secret. One didn’t need to go online to notice that there was a big public protest going on in the middle of Tehran. The raging horns of cars stuck in traffic were a pretty good indicator.

In the collective euphoria that overtook the Western media during the events in Iran, dissenting voices—those challenging the dominant account that emphasized the Internet’s role in fomenting the protests—received far less prominence than those who cheered the onset of the Twitter Revolution. Annabelle Sreberny, professor of global media and communications at London’s School of Oriental and African Studies and an expert on the Iranian media, quickly dismissed Twitter as yet another hype—yet her voice got lost in the rest of the twitter-worshipping commentary. “Twitter was massively overrated. . . . I wouldn’t argue that so-

cial media really mobilised Iranians themselves,” she told the *Guardian*. Hamid Tehrani, the Persian editor of the blogging network Global Voices, was equally skeptical, speculating that the Twitter Revolution hyperbole revealed more about Western new media fantasies than about the reality in Iran. “The west was focused not on the Iranian people but on the role of western technology,” says Tehrani, adding that “Twitter was important in publicising what was happening, but its role was overemphasised.”

Many other members of the Iranian diaspora also felt that Twitter was getting far more attention than it deserved. Five days after the protests began, Mehdi Yahyanejad, manager of *Balatari*, a Los Angeles-based Farsi-language news site similar to *Digg.com*, told the *Washington Post* that “Twitter’s impact inside Iran is zero. . . . Here [in the United States], there is lots of buzz, but once you look . . . you see most of it are Americans tweeting among themselves.”

That the Internet may have also had a negative impact on the protest movement was another aspect overlooked by most media commentators. An exception was Golnaz Esfandiari, an Iranian correspondent with Radio Free Europe, who, writing in *Foreign Policy* a year after the 2009 Iranian elections, deplored Twitter’s “pernicious complicity in allowing rumors to spread.” Esfandiari noticed that “in the early days of the post-election crackdown a rumor quickly spread on Twitter that police helicopters were pouring acid and boiling water on protesters. A year later it remains just that: a rumor.”

Esfandiari also noted that the story of the Iranian activist Saeedeh Pouraghayi—who was supposedly arrested for chanting “Allah Akbar” on her rooftop, raped, disfigured, and murdered, becoming the martyr of the Green Movement—which made the rounds on Twitter, turned out to be a hoax. Pouraghayi later resurfaced in a broadcast on Iranian state television, saying that she had jumped off a balcony on the night she had been arrested and stayed low for the next few months. A reformist website later claimed that the story of her murder was planted by the Iranian government to discredit reports of other rapes. It’s not obvious which side gained more from the hoax and its revelation, but this is exactly the kind of story Western journalists should have been investigating.

Sadly, in their quest to see Ahmadinejad's regime fall at the mercy of tweets, most journalists preferred to look the other way and produce upbeat copy about the emancipatory nature of the Twitter Revolution. As pundits were competing for airtime and bloggers were competing for eyeballs, few bothered to debunk the overblown claims about the power of the Internet. As a result, the myth of Iran's Twitter Revolution soon joined the gigantic pile of other urban myths about the Internet's mighty potential to topple dictators. This explains how, less than a year after the Iranian protests, a *Newsweek* writer mustered the courage to proclaim that "the revolts in Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Burma, Xinjiang, and Iran could never have happened without the web." (*Newsweek*, it must be noted, has been predicting an Internet-led revolution in Iran since 1995, when it published an article pompously titled "Chatrooms and Chadors" which posited that "if the computer geeks are right, Iran is facing the biggest revolution since the Ayatollah Khomeini.")

Unless journalists fully commit themselves to scrutinizing and, if necessary, debunking such myths, the latter risk having a corrosive effect on policymaking. As long as Twitter is presumed to have been instrumental in enabling the Iranian protests, any technologies that would allow Iranians to access Twitter by bypassing their government's censorship are also presumed to be of exceptional importance. When a newspaper like the *Washington Post* makes a case for allocating more funding to such technologies in one of its editorials, as it did in July 2010, by arguing that "investing in censorship-circumvention techniques like those that powered Tehran's 'Twitter revolution' in June 2009 could have a tremendous, measurable impact," it's a much weaker argument than appears at first glance. (The *Post*'s claim that the impact of such technologies could be "measurable" deserves close scrutiny as well.) Similarly, one should start worrying about the likely prominence of the Internet in American foreign policy on hearing Alec Ross, Hillary Clinton's senior adviser for innovation, assert that "social media played a key role in organizing the [Iranian] protests," a claim that is not very different from what Andrew Sullivan declared in June 2009. Even though Ross said this almost a year after Sullivan's hypothetical

conjecture, he still cited no evidence to back up this claim. (In July 2010 Ross inadvertently revealed his own hypocrisy by also proclaiming that "there is very little information to support the claim that Facebook or Twitter or text messaging caused the rioting or can inspire an uprising.")

### Where Are the Weapons of Mass Construction?

If the exalted reaction to the Iranian protests is of any indication, Western policymakers are getting lost in the mists of cyber-utopianism, a quasi-religious belief in the power of the Internet to do supernatural things, from eradicating illiteracy in Africa to organizing all of the world's information, and one of the central beliefs of the Google Doctrine. Opening up closed societies and flushing them with democracy juice until they shed off their authoritarian skin is just one of the high expectations placed on the Internet these days. It's not surprising that a 2010 op-ed in the *Guardian* even proposed to "bombard Iran with broadband"; the Internet is seen as mightier than the bomb. Cyber-utopianism seems to be everywhere these days: T-shirts urging policymakers to "drop tweets, not bombs"—a bold slogan for any modern-day antiwar movement—are already on sale online, while in 2009 one of the streets in a Palestinian refugee camp was even named after a Twitter account.

Tweets, of course, don't topple governments; people do (in a few exceptional cases, the Marines and the CIA can do just fine). Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* has ridiculed the mythical power of the Internet to accomplish what even the most advanced military in the world has so much difficulty accomplishing in Iraq and Afghanistan: "Why did we have to send an army when we could have liberated them the same way we buy shoes?" Why, indeed? The joke is lost on Daniel Kimmage, a senior analyst with Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, who argues that "unfettered access to a free Internet is . . . a very practical means of countering Al Qaeda. . . . As users increasingly make themselves heard, the ensuing chaos . . . may shake the online edifice of Al Qaeda's totalitarian ideology." Jihad Jane and a whole number of other shady characters

who were recruited to the terrorist cause online would be sad to learn that they did not surf the Web long enough.

By the end of 2009 cyber-utopianism reached new heights, and the Norwegian Nobel Committee did not object when *Wired Italy* (the Italian edition of the popular technology magazine) nominated the Internet for the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize, the result of a public campaign by a number of celebrities, ranging from Giorgio Armani to Shirin Ebadi, a previous winner of the Prize. (In 1991, Lennart Meri, the future president of Estonia, nominated Radio Free Europe for the same award for its role in helping to bring an end to the Soviet Union—another interesting parallel with the Cold War era.) Why did the Internet deserve the prize more than Chinese human rights activist Liu Xiaobo, who emerged as the eventual winner of the prize? Justifications given by an assortment of editors of various national editions of *Wired* magazine, the official printing organ of the Church of Cyber-Utopianism, are symptomatic of the kind of discourse that led American diplomats astray in Iran.

Riccardo Luna, the editor of the Italian edition, proposed that the Internet is a “first weapon of mass construction, which we can deploy to destroy hate and conflict and to propagate peace and democracy.” Chris Anderson, the editor of the original American edition, opined that while “a Twitter account may be no match for an AK-47 . . . in the long term the keyboard is mightier than the sword.” David Rowan, the editor of the British edition, argued that the Internet “gave all of us the chance to take back the power from governments and multinationals. It made the world a totally transparent place.” And how can a totally transparent world fail to be a more democratic world as well?

Apparently, nothing bad ever happens on the Internet frequented by the editors of *Wired*; even spam could be viewed as the ultimate form of modern poetry. But refusing to acknowledge the Internet’s darker side is like visiting Berkeley, California, cyber-utopian headquarters, and concluding that this is how the rest of America lives as well: diverse, tolerant, sun-drenched, with plenty of organic food and nice wine, and with hordes of lifelong political activists fighting for causes that don’t

even exist yet. But this is not how the rest of America lives, and this is certainly not how the rest of the world lives.

A further clarification might be in order at this point. The border between cyber-utopianism and cyber-naïveté is a blurry one. In fact, the reason why so many politicians and journalists believe in the power of the Internet is because they have not given this subject much thought. Their faith is not the result of a careful examination of how the Internet is being used by dictators or how it is changing the culture of resistance and dissent. On the contrary, most often it’s just unthinking acceptance of conventional wisdom, which posits that since authoritarian governments are censoring the Internet, they must be really afraid of it. Thus, according to this view, the very presence of a vibrant Internet culture greatly increases the odds that such regimes will collapse.

### HOW NASDAQ Will Save the World

Whatever one calls it, this belief in the democratizing power of the Web ruins the public’s ability to assess future and existing policies, not least because it overstates the positive role that corporations play in democratizing the world without subjecting them to the scrutiny they so justly deserve. Such cyber-utopian propensity to only see the bright side was on full display in early 2010, as Google announced it was pulling out of China, fed up with the growing censorship demands of the Chinese government and mysterious cyber-attacks on its intellectual property. But what should have been treated as a purely rational business decision was lauded as a bold move to support “human rights”; that Google did not mind operating in China for more than four years prior to the pull-out was lost on most commentators.

Writing in *Newsweek*, Jacob Weisberg, a prominent American journalist and publisher, called Google’s decision “heroic,” while Senator John Kerry said that “Google is gutsily taking real risk in standing up for principle.” The Internet guru Clay Shirky proclaimed that “what [Google is] exporting isn’t a product or a service, it’s a freedom.” An editorial in the *New Republic* argued that Google, “an organization filled

with American scientists," was heeding the advice of Andrei Sakharov, a famous Russian dissident physicist, who pleaded with his fellow Soviet scientists to "muster sufficient courage and integrity to resist the temptation and the habit of conformity." Sakharov, of course, was not selling snippet-sized advertising, nor was he on first-name terms with the National Security Agency, but the *New Republic* preferred to gloss over such inconsistencies.

Even famed journalist Bob Woodward fell under the sway of cybertopianism. Appearing on *Meet the Press*, one of the most popular Sunday morning TV shows in America, in May 2010 Woodward suggested that Google's engineers—"some of these people who have these great minds"—should be called in to fix the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. And if Google could fix the oil spill, couldn't they fix Iran as well? It seems that we are only a couple of op-eds away from having Tom Friedman pronounce that Google, with all their marvelous scanners and databases, should take over the Department of Homeland Security.

Google, of course, is not the only subject of nearly universal admiration. A headline in the *Washington Post* declares, "In Egypt, Twitter Trumps Torture," while an editorial in *Financial Times* praises social networking sites like Facebook as "a challenge to undemocratic societies," concluding that "the next great revolution may begin with a Facebook message." (Whether Facebook also presents a challenge to democratic societies is a subject that the editorial didn't broach.) Jared Cohen, the twenty-seven-year-old member of the State Department's Policy Planning staff who sent the infamous email request to Twitter during the Iranian protests, hails Facebook as "one of the most organic tools for democracy promotion the world has ever seen."

One problem that arises from such enthusiastic acceptance of Internet companies' positive role in abetting the fight against authoritarianism is that it lumps all of them together, blurring the differences in their level of commitment to defending human rights, let alone promoting democracy. Twitter, a company that received wide public admiration during the events in Iran, has refused to join the Global Network Initia-

tive (GNI), an industry-wide pledge by other technology companies—including Google, Yahoo, and Microsoft—to behave in accordance with the laws and standards covering the right to freedom of expression and privacy embedded in internationally recognized documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Facebook, another much admired exporter of digital revolutions, refused to join GNI as well, citing lack of resources, a bizarre excuse for a company with \$800 million in 2009 revenues.

While Twitter and Facebook's refusal to join GNI raised the ire of several American senators, it has not at all reflected on their public image. And their executives are right not to worry. They are, after all, friends with the U.S. State Department; they are invited to private dinners with the secretary of state and are taken on tours of exotic places like Iraq, Mexico, and Russia to boost America's image in the world.

There is more than just tech-savvy American diplomacy on full display during such visits. They also reveal that an American company does not need to make many ethical commitments to be friends with the U.S. government, at least as long as it is instrumental to Washington's foreign policy agenda. After eight years of the Bush administration, which was dominated by extremely secretive public-private partnerships like Dick Cheney's Energy Task Force, such behavior hardly provides a good blueprint for public diplomacy.

Google, despite its membership in the GNI, has much to account for as well, ranging from its increasingly carefree attitude toward privacy—hardly a cause for celebration by dissidents around the world—to its penchant for flaunting its own relationship with the U.S. government. Its much-publicized cooperation with the National Security Agency over the cyber-attacks on its servers in early 2010 was hardly an effective way to convince the Iranian authorities of the nonpolitical nature of Internet activities. There is much to admire about Google, Twitter, and Facebook, but as they begin to play an increasingly important role in mediating foreign policy, "admiration" is not a particularly helpful attitude for any policymaker.

## From Milk Shakes to Molotov Cocktails

Jared Cohen's praise of Facebook's organic ability to promote democracy may be just a factual statement. Everything else being equal, a world where so many Chinese and Iranians flock to the services of American technology companies may, indeed, be a world where democracy is more likely to prevail in the long run. It's hard to disagree with this statement, especially if the other alternative is having those users opt for domestic Internet services; those tend to be much more heavily policed and censored.

That said, it's important not to lose sight of the fact that the current situation is not the result of some cunning and extremely successful American strategy to exploit Facebook. Rather, it's the result of both intellectual and market conditions at the time. Until recently, authoritarian governments simply did not give much thought to where their citizens chose to do their email and share their pasta recipes; American companies were often the first to offer their superb services, and most governments did not bother to build any barriers. They may have been piqued by the success of American platforms as opposed to local Internet start-ups, but then their domestic fast food industry was also losing ground to McDonald's; as long as no one could mistake McDonald's vanilla triple-thick shake for a Molotov cocktail, this was not something to worry about.

Nevertheless, once the likes of Jared Cohen start lauding Facebook as an organic tool for promoting democracy, it immediately stops being such. In a sense, the only reason why there was so much laxity in the regulation of Internet services operating in authoritarian states was that their leaders did not make the obvious connection between the business interests of American companies and the political interests of the American government. But as the State Department is trying to harvest the fruits of Silicon Valley's success in the global marketplace, it's inevitable that previously carefree attitudes will give way to increased suspicion. Any explicit moves by American diplomats in this space will be watched closely. Moreover, they will be interpreted according to the prevalent conspiracy theories rather than in light of the stale press releases issued by the State Department to explain its actions.

In July 2010 the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, one of the Chinese government's finest research organizations, published a detailed report about the political implications of the Internet. It argued that social networking sites threaten state security because the United States and other Western countries "are using them to foment instability." It's hard not to see this as a direct response to the words and deeds of Jared Cohen. (The Chinese report did cite unnamed U.S. officials as saying that social networking is an "invaluable tool" for overthrowing foreign government and made good use of the U.S. government's involvement via Twitter in the Iranian unrest of 2009.) When American diplomats call Facebook a tool of democracy promotion, it's safe to assume that the rest of the world believes that America is keen to exploit this tool to its fullest potential rather than just stare at it in awe.

American diplomats have been wrong to treat the Internet, revolutionary as it might seem to them, as a space free of national prejudices; Cyberspace is far less susceptible to policy amnesia than they believe; earlier policy blunders and a long-running history of mutual animosity between the West and the rest won't be forgotten so easily. Even in the digital age, the foreign policy of a country is still constrained by the same set of rather unpleasant barriers that limited it in the analog past. As Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane, two leading scholars of international relations, pointed out more than a decade ago, "information does not flow in a vacuum but in a political space that is already occupied." Until the events in Iran, America's technology giants may have, indeed, functioned in a mostly apolitical vacuum and have been spared any bias that comes with the label "American." Such days, however, are clearly over. In the long run, refusing to recognize this new reality will only complicate the job of promoting democracy.

## Why Hipsters Make Better Revolutions

In the case of Iran, Western policymakers not only misread the Internet but bragged about their own ignorance to anyone who would listen. Much to their surprise, the Iranian government believed their bluff and took aggressive countermeasures, making the job of using the Web to

foster social and political change in Iran and other closed societies considerably harder. The opportunities of three years ago, when governments still thought that bloggers were mere hipsters, amusing but ultimately dismissed as a serious political movement, are no longer available. Bloggers, no longer perceived as trendy slackers, are seen as the new Solidarity activists—an overly idealistic and probably wrong characterization shared by democratic and authoritarian governments alike.

Most disturbingly, a dangerous self-negating prophecy is at work here: The more Western policymakers talk up the threat that bloggers pose to authoritarian regimes, the more likely those regimes are to limit the maneuver space where those bloggers operate. In some countries, such politicization may be for the better, as blogging would take on a more explicit political role, with bloggers enjoying the status of journalists or human rights defenders. But in many other countries such politicization may only stifle the nascent Internet movement, which could have been far more successful if its advocacy were limited to pursuing social rather than political ends. Whether the West needs to politicize blogging and view it as a natural extension of dissident activity is certainly a complex question that merits broad public debate. But the fact that this debate is not happening at the moment does not mean that blogging is not being politicized, often to the point of no return, by the actions—as well as declarations—of Western policymakers.

Furthermore, giving in to cyber-utopianism may preclude policymakers from considering a whole range of other important questions. Should they applaud or bash technology companies who choose to operate in authoritarian regimes, bending their standard procedures as a result? Are they harbingers of democracy, as they claim to be, or just digital equivalents of Halliburton and United Fruit Company, cynically exploiting local business opportunities while also strengthening the governments that let them in? How should the West balance its sudden urge to promote democracy via the Internet with its existing commitments to other nondigital strategies for achieving the same objective, from the fostering of independent political parties to the development

of civil society organizations? What are the best ways of empowering digital activists without putting them at risk? If the Internet is really a revolutionary force that could nudge all authoritarian regimes toward democracy, should the West go quiet on many of its other concerns about the Internet—remember all those fears about cyberwar, cybercrime, online child pornography, Internet piracy—and strike while the iron is still hot?

These are immensely difficult questions; they are also remarkably easy to answer incorrectly. While the Internet has helped to decrease costs for nearly everything, human folly is a commodity that still bears a relatively high price. The oft-repeated mantra of the open source movement—“fail often, fail early”—produces excellent software, but it is not applicable to situations where human lives are at stake. Western policymakers, unlike pundits and academics, simply don't have the luxury of getting it wrong and dealing with the consequences later.

From the perspective of authoritarian governments, the costs of exploiting Western follies have significantly decreased as well. Compromising the security of just one digital activist can mean compromising the security—names, faces, email addresses—of everyone that individual knows. Digitization of information has also led to its immense centralization: One stolen password now opens data doors that used not to exist (just how many different kinds of data—not to mention people—would your email password give access to, if compromised?).

Unbridled cyber-utopianism is an expensive ideology to maintain because authoritarian governments don't stand still and there are absolutely no guarantees they won't find a way to turn the Internet into a powerful tool of oppression. If, on closer examination, it turns out that the Internet has also empowered the secret police, the censors, and the propaganda offices of a modern authoritarian regime, it's quite likely that the process of democratization will become harder, not easier. Similarly, if the Internet has dampened the level of antigovernment sentiment—because people have acquired access to cheap and almost infinite digital entertainment or because they feel they need the government to protect them from the lawlessness of cyberspace—it certainly gives the regime

yet another source of legitimacy. If the Internet is reshaping the very nature and culture of antigovernment resistance and dissent, shifting it away from real-world practices and toward anonymous virtual spaces, it will also have significant consequences for the scale and tempo of the protest movement, not all of them positive.

That's an insight that has been lost on most observers of the political power of the Internet. Refusing to acknowledge that the Web can actually strengthen rather than undermine authoritarian regimes is extremely irresponsible and ultimately results in bad policy, if only because it gives policymakers false confidence that the only things they need to be doing are proactive—rather than reactive—in nature. But if, on careful examination, it turns out that certain types of authoritarian regimes can benefit from the Internet in disproportionately more ways than their opponents, the focus of Western democracy promotion work should shift from empowering the activists to topple their regimes to countering the governments' own exploitation of the Web lest they become even more authoritarian. There is no point in making a revolution more effective, quick, and anonymous if the odds of the revolution's success are worsening in the meantime.

### In Search of a Missing Handle

So far, most policymakers choose to be sleepwalking through this digital minefield, whistling their favorite cyber-utopian tunes and refusing to confront all the evidence. They have also been extremely lucky because the mines were far and few between. This is not an attitude they can afford anymore, if only because the mines are now almost everywhere and, thanks to the growth of the Internet, their explosive power is much greater and has implications that go far beyond the digital realm.

As Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor Boas pointed out in *Open Networks, Closed Regimes*, their pioneering 2003 study about the impact of the pre-Web 2.0 Internet on authoritarianism, "conventional wisdom . . . forms part of the gestalt in which policy is formulated, and a better understanding of the Internet's political effects should lead to better pol-

icy." The inverse is true as well: A poor understanding leads to poor policy.

If the only conclusion about the power of the Internet that Western policymakers have drawn from the Iranian events is that tweets are good for social mobilization, they are not likely to outsmart their authoritarian adversaries, who have so far shown much more sophistication in the online world. It's becoming clear that understanding the full impact of the Internet on the democratization of authoritarian states would require more than just looking at the tweets of Iranian youngsters, for they only tell one part of the story. Instead, one needs to embark on a much more thorough and complex analysis that would look at the totality of forces shaped by the Web.

Much of the current cognitive dissonance is of do-gooders' own making. What did they get wrong? Well, perhaps it was a mistake to treat the Internet as a deterministic one-directional force for either global liberation or oppression, for cosmopolitanism or xenophobia. The reality is that the Internet will enable all of these forces—as well as many others—simultaneously. But as far as laws of the Internet go, this is all we know. Which of the numerous forces unleashed by the Web will prevail in a particular social and political context is impossible to tell without first getting a thorough theoretical understanding of that context.

Likewise, it is naïve to believe that such a sophisticated and multipurpose technology as the Internet could produce identical outcomes—whether good or bad—in countries as diverse as Belarus, Burma, Kazakhstan, and Tunisia. There is so much diversity across modern authoritarian regimes that some Tolstoy paraphrasing might be in order: While all free societies are alike, each unfree society is unfree in its own way. Statistically, it's highly unlikely that such disparate entities would all react to such a powerful stimulus in the same way. To argue that the Internet would result in similar change—that is, democratization—in countries like Russia and China is akin to arguing that globalization, too, would also exert the same effect on them; more than a decade into the new century, such deterministic claims seem highly suspicious.

It is equally erroneous to assume that authoritarianism rests on brutal force alone. Religion, culture, history, and nationalism are all potent forces that, with or without the Internet, shape the nature of modern authoritarianism in ways that no one fully understands yet. In some cases, they undermine it; in many others, they enable it. Anyone who believes in the power of the Internet as I do should resist the temptation to embrace Internet-centrism and unthinkingly assume that, under the pressure of technology, all of these complex forces will evolve in just one direction, making modern authoritarian regimes more open, more participatory, more decentralized, and, all along, more conducive to democracy. The Internet does matter, but we simply don't know how it matters. This fact, paradoxically, only makes it matter even more: The costs of getting it wrong are tremendous. What's clear is that few insights would be gained by looking inward—that is, trying to crack the logic of the Internet; its logic can never be really understood outside the context in which it manifests itself.

Of course, such lack of certainty does not make the job of promoting democracy in the digital age any easier. But, at minimum, it would help if policymakers—and the public at large—free themselves of any intellectual obstacles and biases that may skew their thinking and result in utopian theorizing that has little basis in reality. The hysterical reaction to the protests in Iran has revealed that the West clearly lacks a good working theory about the impact of the Internet on authoritarianism. This is why policymakers, in a desperate attempt to draw at least some lessons about technology and democratization, subject recent events like the overthrow of communist regimes in Eastern Europe to some rather twisted interpretation. Whatever the theoretical merits of such historical parallels, policymakers should remember that all frameworks have consequences: One poorly chosen historical analogy, and the entire strategy derived from it can go to waste.

Nevertheless, while it may be impossible to produce many generalizable laws to describe the relationship between the Internet and political regimes, policymakers shouldn't simply stop thinking about these issues, commission a number of decade-long studies, and wait until the results are in. This is not a viable option. As the Internet gets more com-

plex, so do its applications—and authoritarian regimes are usually quick to put them to good use. The longer the indecision, the greater are the odds that some of the existing opportunities for Internet-enabled action will soon no longer be available.

This is not to deny that, once mastered, the Internet could be a powerful tool in the arsenal of a policymaker; in fact, once such mastery is achieved, it would certainly be irresponsible not to deploy this tool. But as Langdon Winner, one of the shrewdest thinkers about the political implications of modern technology, once observed, “although virtually limitless in their power, our technologies are tools without handles.” The Internet is, unfortunately, no exception. The handle that overconfident policymakers feel in their hands is just an optical illusion; theirs is a false mastery. They don't know how to tap into the power of the Internet, nor can they anticipate the consequences of their actions. In the meantime, all their awkward moments add up and, as was the case in Iran, have dire consequences.

Most of the Western efforts to use the Internet in the fight against authoritarianism could best be described as trying to apply a poor cure to the wrong disease. Policymakers have little control over their cure, which keeps mutating every day, so it never works the way they expect it to. (The lack of a handle does not help either.) The disease part is even more troublesome. The kind of authoritarianism they really want to fight expired in 1989. Today, however, is no 1989, and the sooner policymakers realize this, the sooner they can start crafting Internet policies that are better suited for the modern world.

The upside is that even tools without handles can be of some limited use in any household. One just needs to treat them as such and search for contexts where they are needed. At minimum, one should ensure that such tools don't hurt anyone who tries to use them with the assumption of inevitable mastery. Until policymakers come to terms with the fact that their Internet predicament is driven by such highly uncertain dynamics, they will never succeed in harvesting the Web's mighty potential.

chapter six

## Why the KGB Wants You to Join Facebook



**I** imagine that you are a target of some deeply mysterious spying operation. While you happily poke your online friends, tweet your break-fast plans, and shop for Christmas presents, all your online activity is being secretly reported to an unknown party. Imagine that someone has also broken into your computer and is using it to launch DDoS attacks. They could be targeting Saudi websites about philosophy or dissident Georgian bloggers. You have no idea that your computer is part of this mysterious cyber-army, let alone who is being attacked or why. It's as if a stranger has been secretly reading your diary and also using it to clobber a passerby.

This is precisely what happened to a number of brave activists from Vietnam who in 2009 were protesting the building of a new bauxite mine in their country. (The project is a joint venture between Chalco, a subsidiary of China's state-run aluminum company Chinalco, and the Vietnamese government.) Their computers were compromised, allowing an unknown third party not only to monitor their online activity but also to attack other online targets in Vietnam and elsewhere. But