

# Rhetorics of Hope: Complicating Western Narratives of a "Social Media Revolution"

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## KEYWORDS

transnational feminism, Twitter, social media revolution, Iran, digital literacies, literacy myth

Given the fact that technology is at the core of the One-Third world's ability to dominate—economically, militarily, culturally—the two-thirds world, isn't it also problematic to assume that, with access to technology, liberation from oppressive representational practices is a given?

—Queen 485

In June of 2009, incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the winner of the Iranian presidential election, while opposition leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi cited blatant violations of the fair electoral process. Rallying for democratic justice and calling for action, Iranians filled the streets in the largest demonstrations since the 1979 revolution. The authorities applied pressure against the protesters and people died. Mousavi and Green Movement supporters marched with tape over their mouths, symbolizing the government's silencing of their votes, their demonstrations, and the democratic process. Meanwhile, the Twittersphere was getting louder and louder.

Similar to WTO, G-8, and G-20 protests around the world in the last decade, Twitter and other mobile technology users were active in spreading information and ideas about the protests in Tehran. According to *Mashable*, use of the #IranElection hashtag reached a staggering 221,744 per hour at its height during the June protests (Parr). Western media outlets described Twitter and other social media platforms as helping protesters to orchestrate demonstration logistics and movement through the streets of Tehran. Accounts told that Iranians following and posting #IranElection updates used the almost immediate spread of information to quickly avoid police barriers and reorganize. Striving for political solidarity in the West, the clamoring use of the #CNNfail hashtag prompted expanded CNN coverage of the election protests (see Poniewozik), and the Obama administration pressured the Iranian government to maintain Twitter access during the struggles. When the Iranian government did shut down most Internet access, sympathizers like San Franciscan Austin Heap set up and broadcast instructions for accessing proxy servers set up around the world to circumvent Internet blocks. As Clay Shirky explained at the time, "These flat networks of groups, as opposed to one hierarchical structure, allow instant, on-the-ground, mass communication using mobile devices" (Rawlinson). It was an exciting time for Westerners who watched in anticipation, seeing in real time how Twitter was helping Iranians organize against what the Green Movement described as

a repressive regime, watching as social media was coming to the aid of democracy across the globe. And our very anticipation that (American-made) digital technologies and their literacies could serve these democratic ends assuredly shaped how we saw the situation unfold—at the expense of how it actually happened.

Using a transnational feminist analytic that traces ideological traffic, one aim of this article is to offer a more complex analysis of technology and social protest that counter-poses the U.S. agenda embedded in the digital literacy myth, which I define below. Western rhetorics of hope for digital technologies and their literacies circulate globally and shape public understanding of digitally mediated events. I analyze how such hope circulates in U.S. public intellectual debates and the news media's coverage of social media's role in the 2009 Iranian election protests. These narratives, I find, traffic the digital literacy myth in order to preserve Western expectations of digital technologies and their literacies as serving the democratic project. I argue that these rhetorics of hope render invisible to the Western world a more complex perception of technology's *actual* use for global social protest movements, particularly erasing Iranian women's significant use of technology and embodiment to serve their political project. Following Saskia Sassen, I aim to tell the story of the 2009 Iranian election protests in ways that look beyond the technical capacities of digital tools, understanding their power in the context of "the social environments in which they get used" (342). Through this reading, I contextualize and complicate Western rhetorics of hope and highlight how Iranian women used and were used by technology during the protests.

## NARRATIVES OF HOPE: TRACING THE DIGITAL LITERACY MYTH IN WESTERN MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE 2009 IRANIAN ELECTION PROTESTS

The digital literacy myth—in which government, public, and academic discourses cast digital technologies and their literacies as a means of access to economic gain in the global economy and the spread of democracy on a global scale—is deeply ingrained in our national imaginary and comes with social, political, and material consequences. Long ago, Harvey Graff, Brian Street and other literacy scholars revealed the falsity of literacy's guarantee for a democratic citizenry and upward mobility for individuals, describing it as "the literacy myth." While many scholars came to critique these deeply held hopes for literacy, the development of computer technologies and their associated literacies has recaptured the essence of the literacy myth. As Selfe pointed out in *Literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, the democratic and economic promises of the literacy myth were blended with the economic agenda of the Clinton Administration in the 1990s, and trafficked through policy such as the 1996 National Education Technology Plan, *Getting America's Students Ready for the 21st Century: Meeting the Technology Literacy Challenge*.

Since then, the hope that technologies and their literacies will bring such economic and democratic progress has continued to expand alongside processes of globalization and the development of social media. In what I describe as the digital literacy myth, the economic promises (or consequences) of the original literacy myth are no longer simply afforded to the individual within the national

economy, but to the nation within the global market. Literacy's promise to strengthen the democratic public in the U.S. is now extended to promote the spread of "democracy" across national borders. Digital literacies and education, the U.S. economic agenda within the global marketplace, domestic social policy, and U.S. foreign policy have all born the ideological traffic of the original literacy myth as it has evolved to address the anxieties of our current context. The digital literacy myth and its attendant economic and political agenda now circulate as ideological traffic in Western narratives like those describing the 2009 Iranian election protests, as I trace below.

While later heavily critiqued, many early Western media accounts of the Iranian election protests focused on the use of social media and other modes of digital literacies, such as email and texting, for both coordination of on-the-ground organizing and for dissemination of counter-narratives of the political clashes. The hype was compelling for an audience who is intrigued by, and who stands to benefit from, narratives of digital platforms and their literacies as integral to spreading global democracy. Here is an instance wherein a corrupt government sought to smash the capillaries of information transmission both within and outside of the confines of the state, while the people, guided by their just and righteous will to true freedom, exercised their right to free communication through the cunning use of technologies—or so some told the story. Contrastingly, Evgeny Morozov argues in *The Net Delusion* that Western media response to the Iranian election protests showcased our cyber-utopianism, and he urges that in order to ward off the tangible political dangers of our cyber-utopianism and Internet-centrism, we must replace them with cyber-realism and cyber-agnosticism. Driven by what Morozov calls the Google Doctrine, or "the fervent conviction that given enough gadgets, connectivity, and foreign funding, dictatorships are doomed" (5), these Western narratives express our greatest hopes for the political potential of the technologies we love.

In this section, I aim to heed Morozov's call for a more tempered understanding of technology's democratic potential by listening carefully to what motivates our cyber-utopianism in the wake of the 2009 protests. Following a transnational feminist analytic, I consider the long-standing and currently evolving U.S. agenda in preserving the myth of guaranteed economic progress and democratic promise of technologies and their literacies. Within her framework for networking arguments, Rebecca Dingo uses transnational feminist M. Jacqui Alexander's concept of ideological trafficking in order to reveal "how arguments are networked within a single occasion to show that ideologies traffic across time and texts" (70). For Dingo, tracing ideological traffic unearths the ideological baggage that shapes powerful ideas, allowing rhetoricians to "[lay] bare the rhetorics that have become naturalized and a common part of our political imaginary" (69-70). In the case of Western narratives of the 2009 Iranian election protests, many accounts presented "flattened" narratives that attributed political agency to the technology rather than to the people, thereby missing the opportunity to focus on the more significant nuances of the social movement.<sup>1</sup> Rather than recognizing how women engaged in embodied revolutionary activism, Westerners described a "Twitter Revolution," thereby trafficking the digital literacy myth and erasing the bodies of those fighting for political reform.

My analysis makes visible how Western narratives of the Iranian election protests *traffic* the ideological baggage of the digital literacy myth. This rhetorical networking makes visible Western conceptions of technology as inherently democratic, thereby serving U.S. interests at least as far as

to preserve the myth, while (perhaps) inadvertently working to obscure and flatten the specific local history that shaped the protests and the movement of Iranians therein. Most intriguing about the rhetoric of the U.S. media sampled below is how frequently it attributes political agency to technology rather than to the protesters themselves. While the complexity varies in terms of coverage of the political, material, and historical realities of that particular Iranian moment, each of the following examples from news stories or op-eds published by major Western media outlets takes the step of assigning democratic progress to the technology, rather than to the Iranians who used it.

## LOCATING AGENCY IN RHETORICS OF A "SOCIAL MEDIA REVOLUTION"

An unnamed author for *Fox News* writes in “Twitter Links Iran Protesters to Outside World” that the Iranian government made efforts to block Facebook, YouTube, and BBC Persian, but that they failed to block Twitter. S/he explains that due to this failure, “the simple microblogging service has become Iran’s lifeline to the outside, a way for Iranians to tell the world what’s happening on the streets of Tehran in real time — and a vital means of communication among themselves” (“Twitter Links”). In this account, Twitter’s link to networks beyond national borders is a matter of survival for Iranians. Like other examples, the author cites Twitter’s choice to delay server maintenance in Iran as a generous service to Iranian protesters. This article attributes powerful agency to Twitter through a description of its technical and social capacities—its affordances such as sharing images and videos, the use of the popular hashtag #IranElection, and the use of proxy servers—thereby trafficking the digital literacy myth and its insistence on the democratic power of digital technologies and their literacies. Other examples from Western media coverage of the protests, however, go much further.

In Mark Ambinder’s *Atlantic* article, “The Revolution Will Be Twittered,” he remarks, “when histories of the Iranian election are written, Twitter will doubtless be cast as a protagonal technology that enabled the powerless to survive a brutal crackdown and information blackout by the ruling authorities.” While there may have been some Western coverage of the protests against Ahmadinejad without the service, Ambinder explains, Twitter served the protesters by spreading information about on-the-ground circumstances in real time; “In this way, Twitter served as an intelligence service for the Iranian opposition.” Secondly, he argues, the tweets got the West involved, including the #CNNfail movement critiquing CNN’s lack of coverage of the protests. He writes that technology does not determine an election’s outcome, but he speculates that Mousavi had most likely not been persecuted, assassinated, or arrested because of the threat that social media could facilitate backlash. The Ahmadinejad regime, he argues, is disempowered by the Iranian people’s access to “ways of communicating and organizing outside of their control. Mousavi would become an instant martyr. Twitter, Facebook, blogs—and the mainstream—are all colluding to keep hope alive for the Iranian people.” More overtly than in the case of the *Fox News* article, Ambinder’s rhetoric assigns agency and *intent* to social media. The final line quoted above, for instance, features Twitter, Facebook, and blogs as the subjects of the sentence, and “colluding” as their verb. To “collude” implies that the media are working together with a particular goal—the goal to “keep hope alive for the Iranian people.”

This phrasing suggests that without the affordances of the social media platform, the light of hope for political democracy and social freedom would surely be extinguished. In this case, not only does the digital literacy myth become trafficked into the author's take on the protests, but the democratic power and agency infused within the technology is cast as greater than that of the people themselves.

In their *The New York Times* piece, "Social Networks Spread Defiance Online," Brad Stone and Noam Cohen open by describing Twitter and other social media as an antidote to state media repression, telling of the use of Twitter to spread news and images from the protests. While they refer to the notion of a Twitter Revolution as a cliché, they write that "Twitter is aware of the power of its service," noting the company's choice to delay maintenance on the servers that could have interrupted Iranians' use of the media. Stone and Cohen tell of efforts to bypass government censorship and blocked access through use of proxy servers, such as those set up by Austin Heap of San Francisco, who claimed that about 750 Iranians were using his service at any given moment. Stone and Cohen quote Heap's sentiment that "cyber activism can be a way to empower people living under less than democratic governments around the world."

Stone and Cohen's article is more complex than the others in its analysis. With this extended coverage, however, come more intense attributions of political will and agency to the media itself, as well as to the corporate decisions of the (now publicly traded) company. Sampled above, we see constructions like "Twitter is aware of the power of its service." The authors take their interpretations of Twitter's function in the Iranian election protests and restate them as the media's self-conscious and politically informed interventions into Iranian politics. Such analysis reflects the critiques made by Saskia Sassen that Internet scholars and commentators tend to describe digital platforms "in terms of what they can do and assume that they will do," then apply those hypothetical affordances to their readings of social events (342). The desire to read those affordances as democratically progressive, and to read technology's role in social events as actualizing that potential, reflects the ideological traffic and persuasive currency of the digital literacy myth.

In a final example from *Time Magazine*, Lev Grossman reflects on Twitter's presence in the protests and its power as an accessible, mobile and immediate service. Describing the technical, and thus political, affordances, Grossman argues that "this makes Twitter practically ideal for a mass protest movement, both very easy for the average citizen to use and very hard for any central authority to control." Grossman does attend to some of the complications about Twitter's role in the protests—reflecting that "Twitter isn't a magic bullet against dictators." He concludes that while it didn't cause the protests, Twitter did permit dialogue in the face of dictatorship:

Twitter didn't start the protests in Iran, nor did it make them possible. But there's no question that it has emboldened the protesters, reinforced their conviction that they are not alone and engaged populations outside Iran in an emotional, immediate way that was never possible before. [...] Totalitarian governments rule by brute force, and because they control the consensus worldview of those they rule. Tyranny, in other words, is a monologue. But as long as Twitter is up and running, there's no such thing.

The above passage contains perhaps the most direct instances of Western media's trend in constructing Twitter as the most powerful political agent in the Iranian election protests, positioning the social

media platform as the actor upon Iranians via the constructions that Twitter has “emboldened,” “reinforced,” and “engaged.” Its availability and technical affordances are described in their capacity to thwart totalitarian government tyranny.

Grossman’s statement that “Twitter isn’t a magic bullet against dictators” may be an ironic acknowledgment of his overzealousness in describing Twitter’s role in the protests, but his zeal persists nevertheless. In fact, most of the articles recognized, to some extent, that Twitter was not the cause of the movement, nor was it capable of winning the battle in place of actual protesters—but the moments where the authors point to this fact seem like a brief pause in between descriptions that paint the platform as the champion of Iranian democracy. It seems that, though they knew they shouldn’t, Western-positioned authors wanted to ascribe political agency and democratic good will to social media platforms like Twitter, working its magic on behalf of the Iranian protesters. That such authors articulated the political agency of the digital platform over that of the people in Iran—that the idea of technology serving democracy across the globe was trafficked into the very grammatical constructions of these commentators even if they acknowledged at the same time that such claims were reductive—merely speaks to the pressing power of the digital literacy myth as it hails us. In these Western narratives of a “Social Media Revolution,” Twitter is caricatured as a revolutionary political actor possessing agency that it can and did *give* to protesters in and outside of Iran in order to challenge authoritarian corruption and preserve the interests of democracy.

## COMPETING HOPES: DEBATING SOCIAL MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY IN THE WEST

Despite the trends in locating agency in the technology—rather than the people—that I’ve illustrated above, there was certainly not a homogenous understanding of social media’s role among Western reactions. There has been, in fact, some debate in the weeks and years following the protests, especially as events like the Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movements brought new relevance to the question. In an exchange in *Foreign Affairs*, for instance, public intellectual heavyweights (and perhaps significantly, two white males) Malcolm Gladwell and Clay Shirky debate the extent to which social media has been crucial to recent social movements. The debate evolves out of the juxtaposition of Gladwell’s 2010 essay, “Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted,” and Shirky’s 2011 piece, “The Political Power of Social Media.” Shirky and Gladwell remain committed to particular iterations of the project of democracy, but their disagreement over the role of and potential for social media in protest movements suggests that there are moments of rift, or cracks, in the digital literacy myth wherein conflicting versions of democracy and ideas about technology compete.

In Gladwell’s article, he argues fervently that “we seem to have forgotten what activism is” (43), and that “social media can’t provide what social change has always required” (42). Gladwell is rightly concerned about over-attribution of activist agency to technology; he angrily recaps moments of overzealous response to the use of Twitter in Iran, and in Moldova before that. Citing Mark Pfeifle’s wish to nominate the social media platform for a Nobel Peace Prize, Gladwell returns to Civil Rights

era activism as the defining example of what *real* activism is: an activity that requires high personal risk on the part of protesters and a network of strong ties to incite participation. Social media, Gladwell argues, “makes it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact. The instruments of social media are well suited to making the existing social order more efficient. They are not a natural enemy of the status quo” (49). He argues that rights of consequence in the face of brutal and material oppression will not be won by and for the disenfranchised through slactivist means.

The following year, Clay Shirky’s article in *Foreign Affairs* questions U.S. government strategy and foreign policy in the Information Age. Shirky advocates for an “environmental approach,” in which U.S. policy would support saturation of social media to build a strong public sphere (5). He argues that an informed and literate citizenry who is connected enough for exchange of ideas is necessary for political freedom (6), and that this environment is best evolved slowly over time. Invoking some of the central tenets of the digital literacy myth, Shirky suggests that in order to appeal to nations with inclinations toward censorship and repression of its citizenry, the U.S. government ought to highlight the possibility for financial growth. Since governments understand that their economies suffer when they restrict access to digital markets, “the U.S. government should work for conditions that increase the conservative dilemma, appealing to states’ self-interest rather than the contentious virtue of freedom, as a way to create or strengthen countries’ public spheres” (9). For Shirky, the digital facilitates the literate citizenry on its way to achieving and preserving democratic freedom by virtue of its ability to connect the people.

This position lays bare some of the economic interests that assure the digital literacy myth’s viability. According to Shirky, the U.S. should encourage other nations to sustain digital networks for their own economic gain—a strategy that he suggests will have the added benefit of nurturing a more democratic public sphere. What Shirky does not explicitly acknowledge here is how the U.S.’s own economic interests are served by widening the global technology consumer base, and therefore his suggestion also serves the economic agenda that circulates with the digital literacy myth. In other words, the social and economic national agenda tied to democratic narratives about digital technologies and their literacies can be articulated as: literacy + digital connection + economic incentives for so-called authoritarian nations = exported democracy + economic benefits for those states (+ U.S. economic gains from the spread of global investment in technology).<sup>2</sup>

Shirky does acknowledge that just as protesters can use technologies to strengthen their political offenses, so can the state (though, as he alluded to above, states profit economically from commerce that depends on communication technologies, and shutting down those networks can be self-sabotaging). However, Shirky’s conclusions in this article are more closely aligned with Gladwell’s faithful rendition of traditional democratic values than he might notice behind the glare of their technological medium: Gladwell values traditional forms of activism, and Shirky values traditional ideas about a literate citizenry needing access to a free and open public sphere. Raising the question of technology’s relationship to democratic social movements and how we should understand technology to be intervening in the democratic transformations of nations, their debate reflects the evolving trajectory of the digital literacy myth and recalls its roots in the print-based literacy myth

that preceded it. Here, the ideological tracks of democracy and literacies and their technologies are at a crossroads brought on by our co-existing national projects of exporting democracy and brokering technologies in order to fulfill neoliberal ambitions and satisfy U.S. economic agendas. Where the original literacy myth projected the economic mobility of the individual and the promise of a more complete national democratic landscape with the rise of literacy, the digital literacy myth in its global context is taken up not only in the domestic sphere, but also with respect to foreign policy, or “21<sup>st</sup> century statecraft,” as Hilary Clinton has called it.

What the Shirky-Gladwell debate reveals is that at times the dual ideological commitments of the digital literacy myth lose their cohesion. Carefully paying attention to the debate, to heed Selfe’s advice, helps us further trace the ideological trafficking of the digital literacy myth and its internal tensions. Additionally, the debate neglects the actual bodies of the protesters who are acting (virtually and in embodied ways) at the sites of conflict. The bodies that *do* get invoked among these articles are those of Americans in the Civil Rights era, where Gladwell is scripting democratic processes as only legitimate and effective when embodied. Hence, American bodies are recognized for their political agency, where actual bodies in Iran, as well as in Moldova, the Arab Spring, and the Occupy movements are erased from this representation about the legitimate use of technology in their protest efforts. Women’s bodies, among others, are lost in the crack of the myth, as the ideologies of digital optimism and democracy are cross-trafficked in conflicting ways.

Moving beyond the binary question about technology and democracy, to get at the actual impact of social media in connection with a diffuse global public, Sassen writes that what is at stake in the question of technology and social action “is not so much the possibility of such political practices,” as it is the “magnitude, scope and simultaneity: the technologies, the institutions, and the imaginaries that mark the current global digital context inscribe local political practice with new meanings and new potentialities” (370). In this way, Sassen agrees with Shirky’s more subtle point about the spreading of an ambiance of an active global public, one which bridges a given local political event with a global consciousness that is ready to participate in, watch, and discuss local events on a geopolitically distributed level. In this way, even the most critical theorists are driven to ask the question about how technologies shape us just as we shape them, and what opportunities and challenges arise therein. In other words, it is not only neoliberalism’s interests that are served through the trafficking of a digital literacy myth that promises economic progress and an enhanced democracy. The dream of digital technologies and their literacies’ potential to rescue us remains compelling—even for those who describe technology as serving capitalism and its attendant material costs for the lived realities of those who pay for the profits of the few.<sup>3</sup> The digital literacy myth permeates narratives of technology even in those whose work is explicitly critical of such ideological traffic.<sup>4</sup>

By networking arguments, however, we can make visible the prevailing and powerful grand narratives about technology, narratives that are informed by U.S. political and economic interests and strategy for an evolving global market. Tracing the ideological traffic of the digital literacy myth confirms that technology’s role and impact in social uprising cannot, as Sassen advocates, be separated from microcontexts. My analysis of the Western media coverage of the 2009 protests above reflects



our urge to see the teleological fruit of technology as granting global democracy, while the Shirky/Gladwell debate reveals that even among more skeptical accounts about the use of technology for democratic ends, flattened narratives offer disembodied, decontextualized claims that serve better to reveal ideological traffic than to investigate the actual use of technology in the locations that brought on the debate in the first place. As I continue to develop below, in the microcontext of the Iranian election protests, when we do traffic (and thus preserve) ideologies like the digital literacy myth, we allow cultural scripts and unacknowledged political and economic interests not of our own choosing to speak and act through us.

Since these narratives collect and work in the world, scholars must take notice of their transgressions and reveal the consequences of such trafficking. While the interests of global economic and state powers work through One-Third world readings of such powerful global events, scholars can use an analytic like Dingo's networking arguments to ameliorate the unintended and invisible effects of such narratives, particularly for the women of the Two-Thirds world. The flattening of political complexities during the Iranian election protests for the sake of trafficking ideas of democratic technologies *costs*, among other things, richer accounts of women's agencies in digital and bodily contexts, in solidarity both within and beyond the borders of Iran. To combat such flattened narratives and recover a contextualized representation of specific bodies in the 2009 Iranian election protests, my analysis below works to recognize the complex roles of women and technology in the social movement.

## WOMEN IN THE IRANIAN ELECTION PROTESTS

Critiquing the discourse on social media in the Iranian election protests in her *Time* article "The Twitter Devolution," Golnaz Esfandiari bashes early accounts for their inaccuracy, overzealousness, and lazy reporting. She argues that such narratives have "been a terrible injustice to the Iranians who have made real, not remote or virtual, sacrifices in pursuit of justice (Esfandiari). In fact, Westerners claiming that technology *gave* agency and power to Iranian activists are asking the wrong question and gathering the wrong answers. In their efforts to maintain and support rhetorics of hope for the democratic promise of technologies and their literacies, Western narratives have eclipsed a much more interesting and more profound, historically rooted and contextually emergent understanding of technology's role in the election protests.

One, among many, of the kinds of narratives that could have been told in place of those that transfer agency from Iranians to technologies, is that of the unprecedented numbers of women involved in the campaigning, organizing, and protests surrounding the 2009 elections. In fact, the reduced worth of women's bodies articulated in the Iranian legal system was among the most significant political and social questions at stake in the outcome in this election, and hence one of the most significant causes for the protests. In this section, I draw upon transnational feminism to "place micro-examples within macrocontexts" in order to "consider not only a woman's local circumstances but also how vectors of power—supranational policies, colonial history, global economic structures, even our practices here in the West—shape women's lives in disparate places" (Dingo 144). I return

dimension to the flattened Western narratives described above through an analysis of Iranian women's history of activism in recent decades and during the protests, placing examples of #IranElection tweets within their historical context.

That women were involved in the protests is less novel than the ways in which they united and built coalitions to make demands for their rights. In the three months leading up to the election, over 40 organizations and 700 individuals came together to form the group Convergence of Women, demanding that candidates consent to and implement the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women<sup>5</sup> (CEDAW), and that they reform those aspects of the constitution and legal system under which women are unequal to men. A portrayal of the rich ways women used their available means to shape political outcomes breathes much greater life into the 2009 protests and helps us understand that the use of technology at the time was a likely next step given the ways that women and men were building upon already established social networks of all kinds to realize their political agency. Additionally, the presence of women's bodies in the protests and online reflects the fact that embodiment as a form of political agency is not limited to physical or national borders.

#### *Momentum in Iranian Women's Activism*

Since the 1979 revolution, Iranian women have been actively organizing and expanding policy reforms to better their social position and systemic rights. Among the most significant accomplishments has been the increase in literacy rates among women from 38% in 1980 to 70% in 2000 overall, with impressive rates of 91% in the age group of 15-24 (Moruzzi 11). Under President Khatami, we see a shift in policy language from that in *The First Economic, Social, Cultural Development Plan of the Islamic Republic (1989-93)*, where goals included "bringing about a higher level of participation among women in social, cultural, educational and economic affairs, while maintaining the values of the family and the character of Muslim women" (qtd. in Tazmini 67). According to the Centre for Women's Participation's *National Report on Women's Status in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Iran's educational priorities under Khatami include "modifying educational materials in order to portray the correct image of women's roles in the family and society, and of the mutual rights of women, men, and the family at all levels," as well as "revising existing education laws that are gender biased" (67), and "teaching management skills to women with the aim of enhancing their participation in the sphere of decision-making" (68). These shifts at the policy level were occurring in conjunction with the reform movement begun in 1997, when women's participation in the presidential election campaign, appointment, and election to positions of public office were reaching unprecedented levels (Tazmini 68-69; Haghghatoo 15). And, while none of the 42 women who registered to vie for the 2009 presidential candidacy were approved by the Guardian Council, the role of women's issues in the presidential campaigning showed a promise for possible change, thanks in part to the One Million Signatures campaign.

Evolving out of this history of activism and change, the One Million Signatures campaign emerged in August 2006. The campaign was unique in its issue-based approach; its one goal was the reform of gender-discriminatory laws that seep down through Iranian society and help shape

the social imaginary that defines women's roles and acceptable treatment of women. Seeking to end legal polygamy to preserve women's rights as the sole beneficiaries of the economic advantages of marriage, to reform alimony law to better ensure that women will be financially protected when husbands divorce them, and to put an end to honor killings, the activists of the One Million Signatures campaign sought to gain support through means of "nonviolent street politics" (Khorasani 42). Activists used the networks already established within their daily lives to share information and gain support through face-to-face encounters in friends' homes, hair salons, and other public gathering spaces (42-44). According to co-founder Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, the campaign's choice to embody an issue-based approach utilizing tactics that are already embedded in volunteers' daily lives helped avoid fights over ideology and identity politics that have presented deep challenges for prior waves of Iranian feminist activity.

Contrasting the 1979 revolution with the activist mood of 2009, Khorasani writes: "one need only look at all the images from this past June showing long lines of demonstrators in which millions of young men and women freely mix with one another, standing shoulder to shoulder in a way that was hardly in evidence during the last days of the Shah's regime or the first days of Khomeini's" (91). Khorasani's discussion of the process and success of the One Million Signature's campaign describes how women volunteers (and even some men) moved their bodies among their social networks in order to spread the message of legal reform. The in-person nature of the movement was especially significant because women are defined as half-persons throughout the Iranian laws that the campaign sought to reform. Charges of adultery, for instance, according to Article 74 of the Penal Code, "whether punishable flogging or stoning, may be proven by the testimony of four just men or that of three just men and two just women" (136). Women's bodies are similarly valued at half that of men's in Iran's legal code, such as in Article 300: "The blood money for the first- or second-degree murder of a Muslim woman is half that of a murdered Muslim man" (137). The presence of a woman volunteer speaking out against such laws works to affirm her own wholeness; the woman-to-woman direct education and the solidarity and plurality represented by the signatures stand in dismissal of those Iranian laws that reduce women's value to half that of men's. My focus on women's bodies here is not to contain their worth in the body, but conversely to demonstrate that Western and One-Third world rhetorics about digital technologies and their literacies have material consequences, particularly for women when their bodies are erased by rhetorics of technology's agency.

The One Million Signatures Campaign is, in part, based upon a belief that changing Iranian legal culture will help shift the social dynamic within which women do not have the freedoms for which they are organizing. As the campaign evolved, building on their face-to-face and volunteer-education based tactics, organizers added an online component to their canvassing and tapped into the changing landscape of election politics to advance their cause. As the One Million Signatures campaign and the Convergence gained support, presidential candidates Mousavi and Karroubi were compelled to—or, in the very least saw the political advantage available in the choice to—publicly commit to supporting reform of women's rights upon election. The Internet was one tool at the disposal of the Convergence and the One Million Signatures Campaign, but it was hardly the most significant and is in any case a tool fraught with a conflicted role in Iranian history.

*A Tempered Account of Social Media in the Election Protests*

Internet access and use is situated within a complex political and social history of post-revolutionary Iran, whose combination of democratic and Islamist governmental structure has struggled to balance interests as a developing nation working to maintain profits from oil exports while gaining footing in the global economy and preserving an authentic Islamic cultural character independent against Western/colonial impingement. In *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran*, Anabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany describe the conflicting social and economic factors shaping Iran's relationship with the web, showing that "private capital is challenging the monopoly of the state as government policies slowly adapt to the marketization and privatization of the communication sector, while the broader national and international contexts make for an intriguing mix of internet and media developments" (3). Noting the generally repressed political environment during the expansion of the Internet in Iran, they explain that "the state remains significant as the primary actor in engineering political legitimacy and the definer of the 'national' character and culture" (86). State control in this case, they argue, can be explained not by general Islamic principles, "but rather as the evolution of different periods of the post-revolutionary polity" (87). And yet through the policing of public and political organizing by the state, the Iranian government (particularly under Ahmadinejad) may have actually pushed people toward disembodied political expression via the Internet. As Sreberny and Khiabany put it, "by keeping people indoors, with little to do but fiddle with computers, the regime helped to induce a generation of digital adepts, the consequences of which it was to rue in the summer of 2009" (116). In other words, the conservative and progressive blocks in the political mood of post-revolutionary Iran, combined with its economic interests in joining and profiting from the global market, has resulted in a complicated scene for activism where it must hide in plain sight along already established social routes while also taking to the online global public of the Blogosphere and Twittersverse.

While the Western narratives I discuss above carry the ideological traffic of the digital literacy myth by declaring that Twitter *gave* Iranians a voice, in fact, the idea that Twitter formed the protests, that this was a "Twitter revolution," or even that Iranians from within Iran were tweeting much at all during the protests has been heavily disputed. Sreberny and Khiabany write that "so much of the tweeting, as is increasingly the case with much media content, is a repost or commentary on previously published material. Twitter functioned mainly as a huge echo chamber of solidarity messages from global voices that simply slowed the general speed of traffic" (175). Years later, it seems that far less tweeting than initially described was actually occurring from within Iran at all. Rather, the Iranian diaspora, Green Movement sympathizers, and certainly Westerners, who read the protesters' actions as a sign of affirmation for their own views on democracy, used Twitter to circulate what information they could and to join in the cause symbolically and from afar.

Within the #IranElection conversation, individual tweeters became nodal points for the movement, facilitating the geographical spread of its public reach. Recognizing and tapping into the buzz about Twitter's role in the protests, The Web Ecology Project tracked over two million #IranElection tweets between June 7<sup>th</sup> and June 27<sup>th</sup> (the release date of their report) to trace what

they describe as “the Twitter web ecology” (1). The study found that almost 60% of those tweeting during their sample period contributed only once to the conversation, that over 65% of the tweets came from the top 10% most avid participants, and that 25% of the tweets were retweets of someone else’s content (1). User @Dominiquerdr, for instance, posted 2,817 tweets about Iran between June 7<sup>th</sup> and June 29<sup>th</sup> (6). While she was the top tweeter in the conversation during that time, her own content was only retweeted 314 times in those 18 days, revealing her relative lack of influence among the Twitter web ecology participants (7).

During the protests and in many months following, expatriate and Canadian-Iranian @Dominiquerdr listed Tehran as her location, and yet, she located herself transnationally through her linguistic choices. This tweeter wrote in French, English, and Farsi, linking to articles and websites in all three languages, sometimes using several languages in one tweet. Around the time of the protests, @Dominiquerdr had over 3,700 followers, and had tweeted over 200,000 times. Given the number, and drawing on observable data such as the Twitter users’ names, locations, and languages used, we can see that this single tweeter helped to orchestrate a network that crossed languages, national boundaries, and oceans. While @Dominiquerdr was not physically present in Iran during the protests, she was able to connect to the political body of Iranians and the Iranian diaspora via her work in curating ideas and information through her tweets, reflecting that women both within and outside of Iran drew upon available networks to exercise their political agency during the protests. Considering that each of her 3,700 followers had their own networks as well, we can see how huge the potential circulation is, and why it is tempting when describing Twitter as a political public sphere to attribute agency to the platform itself.

@Dominiquerdr’s work during the protests and in service of the movement following that summer and autumn further reflects how individual users can apply different tactics afforded by the Twitter interface, which allow the ideological and on-the-ground coordinating of a movement within publics that produce and circulate 140-character texts. A single tweet can reference multiple authors or circulators, report immediate events, link to media containing news, facts, unsanctioned stories of the people, instructions for future gatherings, and much more. Drawing on Twitter’s ability to share links to photos, videos, and articles, users organized and maintained active and growing networks, sharing information and circulating ideological materials that attested to the movement’s strength and endurance. Among the most tweeted in the days following the 2009 election (in English, Farsi, and French) were links to media about Neda Agha-Soltan, a young woman who was shot by a sniper during a demonstration. Her name meaning “voice” in Farsi, Neda quickly became a symbol of the Green Movement. Viewers in Iran and around the world have been able to watch this woman’s death on YouTube as her body begins to fail in the wake of a bullet wound, her voice coach and frantic strangers by her side. Neda’s death was taken up and circulated in part because of the political symbolism Iranian protesters were able to graft onto her body. Participants and sympathizers of the Green Movement constructed images that transformed the death of Neda’s body into a symbol of hope or fear for the body of Iran, as I explore in the following examples.<sup>6</sup>

In this image, (Fig. 1) Neda appears in black and white, an orb of white glowing behind her head, perhaps indicating her innocence. The caption: “We are all Neda” moves beyond solidarity to



Fig. 1. We Are All Neda.

homogeneity and consubstantiality. The creator and circulators of the image portray that in the eyes of the militarized Ahmadinejad regime, any Iranian body is subject to death for speaking out or standing up for their freedom.

Figure 2 bears a black and white rendering of Neda’s face covered in blood. This still from the video footage of her death was used in many such images, as protesters sought to capture the light leaving her eyes. The blood patterns on her face obscure her own vision and our vision of her, signaling perhaps the

ensorship of Iranian (women’s) bodies under the tyranny of Ahmadinejad and his *basij* (the morality police). The background reflects the representative color of the Green Movement, and the text “Where Is My Vote” was a common slogan used to challenge the legitimacy of the election. Neda’s image featured with the slogan rhetorically presents the value of a body as a voice in a democracy. Here, they seem to shout, both have been extinguished.

In perhaps the most overt example (Fig. 3), Neda’s image has been overlaid with the Iranian flag. Her clothing has been replaced with the green, white, and red of the flag like a second skin. The symbol of Iran, featured in the middle of the flag, covers the center of her face, almost like a target. Blood splatters appear in the foreground, layered



Fig. 2. Where is My Vote?



Fig. 3. Neda in Blood.

above her body and the flag. The red of the blood nearly blends with the red of the flag. At once, this image seems to suggest that Neda’s body is one with the body of the Iranian people, and that the current Iranian state had targeted that body.

As the final image indicates (Fig. 4), Neda’s bloodied body was taken up as a symbol not just virtually, but in on-the-ground protests as well. For the Green Movement, to visualize and make present Neda’s dying body at the sites of protest was a strategy to keep alive the voice and the vote that were symbolically and actually extinguished with her death.

In these ways, Neda's death was taken up and re-presented as the death of the Iranian democratic body. As feminist and Iranian scholar Nayereh Tohidi explains:

Neda's characteristics are representative of some of the demographic, gender, and class orientations of the current civil rights movement in Iran. Her young age (27 years old) reminds us of the 70 percent of Iran's population below age 30 who are faced with increasing rates of unemployment, socio-political repression, and humiliation should Ahmadinejad's repressive and militaristic policies continue for another four years. (8)

The protesters, Green Movement supporters and Iranian diaspora saw Neda's body as the embodiment of their desire for freedom from political repression, and they used that body digitally for their



Fig. 4. Image of Neda's body at protest.

purposes. They consistently circulated articles about her life and the family she left behind, links to the video of her death, and her iconized image on Twitter. In the recent years leading up to and following circulation of Neda's body and blood and final breaths on the Internet, Iran was seeing an "increasing number of women who are beaten, injured, killed, or arrested as political prisoners since the June 12 upheavals" (Tohidi 7). In reality, the

circulation of Neda's death did reflect the growing frequency of state violence against the bodies of women who use their political voices in Iran. What this more tempered consideration of tweets surrounding the protests reveals is that Twitter can be understood as a space where texts can articulate and be articulated by a global public—too diffuse to be snuffed out, yet too rhizomatous to guarantee success in any given purpose. And, when considering Twitter's aptness for political purposes, we cannot extract the platform's usefulness from its historical context; in fact, when we do so we miss the most significant indicators of its impact.

## CONCLUSION

In the case of the 2009 Iranian election protests, stories covering "the Twitter revolution" eclipsed more significant and accurate accounts of technologies and how activists employed them. Trafficking the digital literacy myth, those accounts obscured more reflective analyses of the most significant political networks, many of which had been built from the ground up by women in recent years and without which no political movement would have had footing for demonstrations of such scale. In debating to what extent the role of social media can be used in service of democratic movements, for instance, Gladwell and Shirky's exchange eclipses the fact that images of Neda's body—dying and bloodied in the midst of a revolutionary protest—came to reflect the very political body of Iran, particularly through its circulation across social media networks and geopolitical borders.

Nor did such accounts recognize the ways in which Iranian women worked with strategies of embodiment and disembodied activism to heal and make whole legal devaluations of women's bodies in the legal architecture of the nation. Flattened narratives about the democratic promise of Twitter for Iran similarly made opaque the complex history of feminist activism in Iran, and the difficult position a global network such as Twitter casts for a locally rooted movement. Describing the One Million Signatures Campaign's conflicting goals with regard to networking with transnational feminist groups, for instance, Khorasani expressed significant anxiety about joining with transnational movements, recognizing the need to balance local knowledge and experience with global power and influence (78). Cooptation is merely one risk of opening a movement up to global networks of solidarity. In these ways and more, Western narratives of the Iranian election protests that touted Twitter's democratic results for the women and men of Iran failed us all.

In *Territory, Authority, Rights*, Sassen contends with "easy generalizations" about economic globalization, particularly the notion that the state is in decline due to a distinct set of global forces that act upon the declining nation-state with predetermined consequences of neoliberalism, opening of markets, and the fall of the welfare state. Rather, Sassen argues that we must conceive of the effects of globalization in terms of variation, since global forces "confront considerable national specificity" (227). Fear of decline in economic and innovative status might be one motivating factor explaining the current saturation of the digital literacy myth, with its promise for the economic progress of the One-Third world and in compatibility with specifically Western versions of democratic progress.

When we network the economic and political interests contained within the digital literacy myth with reductive Western accounts of a "Twitter Revolution" that obscures any historical context for technology or activism in Iran—and one which overlooks significant stories about the role of women, women's bodies and technology in protest—we can tie such narratives to fear about the decline of the U.S. in the future global economy, a fear that motivates and sustains the digital literacy myth. The deeper our fear, perhaps, the louder our hope. The result of this ideological trafficking, as I have shown, is the rhetorical erasure of the political agency and embodied realities of actual human agents in the democratic processes the Western commentators describe. Realities of women's activism, in a geopolitical region that the West is often quick to point out as particularly oppressive to women, are disembodied and erased in narratives that traffic ideologies of technology and democracy in service of Western interests. Those interested in challenging the material and political consequences of rhetorics of hope for technology should continue to network arguments about its use toward democracy across borders in order to challenge and prevent similar ideologically motivated erasures.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In Shirky's use of the term, "flat" refers to horizontal networks of agency and power wherein action can originate from and move through other nodes in the network fluidly and with spontaneity, as opposed to how power moves in a top-down hierarchical model. My own use of the word "flattened," usually referring to narratives, describes ways in which global/local histories, material realities, and complex distributions of agency across contexts are collapsed in representations that seek or work to circulate a particular ideology or series of political commitments, especially when located in a transnational gaze from a One-Third world nation to a Two-Thirds world.

<sup>2</sup> This equation is an extension of the implicit ideological and economic agenda of the Clinton Administration's technological literacy plan, articulated by Selfe in *Technology and Literacy in the 21st Century* as: "science + technology + democracy (+ capitalism) + education = progress + literate citizenry (122-3).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Hardt and Negri's *Empire* trilogy, wherein they argue that the tools and requirements of the worker-subject in the global era can become the tools through which the multitude reclaims the common.

<sup>4</sup> This project began with my own awe at Twitter's democratic power in the Iranian election protests in 2009, in fact. It has only been under careful reflection and guidance from outside readers that I've come to explicitly critique these rhetorics.

<sup>5</sup> It's important to note that the United States has also declined to ratify CEDAW.

<sup>6</sup> These images have been circulated so vastly that their origins are obscure and beside the point. For that reason, I offer no citation for them.

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