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My First Piece About Social Media: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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Abstract

There is nothing quite like looking back at something you wrote 6 years ago, particularly when the piece was about "new" technology. Your solid points seem extra solid, and your weak points seem unbearably weak. Most importantly, however, you can see the extent to which your thinking was influenced by dominant understandings and frameworks of the time. So, when I was asked to contribute a short thought-piece on social media for this inaugural issue, it occurred to me that it might be of value to look back rather than forward: to re-read something I had written about Twitter and Facebook years ago, and to identify what I got right and what I got wrong. I decided to go all the way back and to look at the very first thing I wrote about social media. This was not an academic piece, but a popular article written for *Le Monde Diplomatique* on the use of Twitter and Facebook in the aftermath of the 2009 Iranian elections.

Keywords

social media, politics, research

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I decided to go all the way back and to look at the very first thing I wrote about social media. This was not an academic piece, but a popular article written for *Le Monde Diplomatique* on the use of Twitter and Facebook in the aftermath of the 2009 Iranian elections (Christensen, 2009). So, I poured myself some coffee, opened the webpage, and started to read. Four seconds in, and I was already irritated. The title "Iran: Networked Dissent." It was *clickbait* before there was the word *clickbait*. It is a title I have regretted for years as it oozes such a techno-centric, liberation technology vibe: perspectives I actually attempted to downplay in the piece (and later pieces).

But what about the content, and what the content can tell us about how we see social media as an object of study? The thing that bothers me the most in the piece can be summed up in this passage:

> traditional media such as newspapers, television and radio are often territorially-bound, and thus subject to national laws (libel, censorship) and political-economic power structures (political pressure, ownership bias, advertiser demands); whereas Social networking media are often decentralised, non-hierarchical and contain user-generated content. (Christensen, 2009)

OK, this was 2009, not 2015, so I will cut myself a little slack, but the juxtaposition between traditional/legacy media I posit here is far too simplistic, ignoring the political economy of social media ownership, the presence of online hierarchies, not to mention the influence of design and architecture upon use and content. In addition, I neglected to note that in 2009, the number of Twitter users in Iran was miniscule, and that use was relegated to a niche urban elite. At the time, I assumed that readers would take these facts as a given, but they need to be stated. Always. Explicitly.

And what did I get right . . . or at least not get wrong? When reading the piece, it struck me how a number of the points I considered important remain salient: the potential

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for the international spread of images and information by average citizens; the use of technology by repressive regimes for purposes of surveillance and repression; the practice of using proxy servers for by-passing censorship; and, perhaps most importantly, the fact that the technology used by the Iranian authorities to locate and identify dissidents was sold to them by companies such as Nokia Siemens. So, while the West (for want of a better term) was on the one hand congratulating itself for producing the technology used to help ordinary Iranians "emancipate" themselves from the yoke of authoritarianism, on the other, it was selling other forms of technology used to repress those same citizens. It was (and continues to be) the most cynical of vertical integrations.

So, for this inaugural issue of *Social Media + Society*, what does this look back tell us about social media: what it is, what it could be, and how we should look at it? Given the discussion of my article from 2009, I would argue that we should always think of (most) social media as businesses first. This is not to say that all analyses must be political economic in nature, but rather that because a great deal of popular discourse has pitched a neutral version of social media (Twitter in particular) where profit motive is invisible, it is the role of research to shed light upon this element. It is important to note, however, that one of the shortcomings of political economy as a framework for media analysis is that it often takes Western media and political structures as points of departure, thus failing to account for the potentially positive impact of commercial media outlets and platforms in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian countries.

Social media are commercial platforms: sometimes useful, sometimes abused, sometimes transformative, sometimes censored, sometimes dangerous, and often misunderstood. Sounds familiar.

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Christensen, C. (2009, July). Iran: Networked dissent. *Le Monde Diplomatique*. Retrieved from http://mondediplo.com/blogs/iran-networked-dissent

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