

chapter one

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 Moussavi.” 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.”*

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

* 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 Pfeifle, 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 YouTubing. 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—itsself 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 cyber-war. 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.