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The Power of 140 Characters: Twitter in the Middle East

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The massive, sustained protests in Iran this past month against the regime's apparent falsification of the presidential election results was enabled by widespread employment of new communication technologies. Among them is Twitter, the micro-blog which enables its users to distribute short messages of no more than 140 characters ('Tweets') via the Internet, including by way of cellular phones. One may follow their favorite 'Tweets', whether those of individuals or announcements by groups, by visiting the Twitter website <twitter.com>.

Apart from serving as an additional means of personal communication, Twitter is used in the Arab-Islamic Middle East by a whole range of groups and individuals, covering the entire gamut of society. 'Tweets' are employed by political and social movements, religious websites and Islamic cultural centers, as well as for the promotion of films, fashion and commerce. News organizations, such as CNN, the BBC (especially its Persian language service), Al-Jazeera and the Voice of America all have popular Twitter feeds. Twitter speeds up the capacity to deliver the news because of its restricted structure, so much so that many people choose it over newspapers as their primary news source.

As a parallel information universe, Twitter enables the dissemination of information, mobilization of public opinion and evasion of governmental

censors. In Syria, for example, Twitter enabled a wave of protests against the decision by the website, 'LinkedIn' – a social networking geared towards those interested in business – to block its services in Syria, and the decision was ultimately reversed. Earlier this year in Iran, Twitter was employed by 'the March 18th movement' in remembrance of the Iranian blogger, Omid Razah, who died in prison on that date, and to pressure the authorities to release seven Bahai leaders that were arrested during the month of May.

A particularly powerful demonstration of Twitter's potential came following the arrest of an American journalism student in Egypt while filming a demonstration. He immediately sent a message via his cell phone announcing his arrest to 48 "followers" on Twitter, and the message quickly spread around the world. As a result of the ensuing attention and entreaties, he was quickly released. Similarly, the well-known Egyptian blogger, Wa'el Abbas, was quick to publicize his arrest and subsequent experiences with the police this past April, causing embarrassment to Egyptian officialdom.

The usages of Twitter by women in the Arab world are especially varied, not surprisingly, given the relative anonymity it provides to the user. Twitter allows women to search for spouses, describe their lives, discuss issues pertaining to the status of Muslim women in their societies, and communicate and show solidarity with like-minded individuals, for example, lesbians. Women from Saudi Arabia tend to hide their personal 'Tweets' so that only those who have received their permission in advance can read their announcements. Women from most other Arab societies, which are socially more open and less hierarchical than Saudi Arabia, are more likely to enable their 'Tweets' to be read by all.

Women's advocacy groups make good use of Twitter: for example, the Egyptian group 'All of Us are Laila' has fought against the inequality in women's daily lives, in Egypt and the Arab world in general, for the last three years. So does Queen Rania of Jordan, who writes about diverse subjects on an almost daily basis, to a readership of about 125,000.

To be sure, there are those who belittle Twitter's reliability as a source of information, pointing to its maximum limit of 140 characters per item, and the instant worldwide dissemination of Twitter items without any cross-checking information to confirm their truthfulness. But these limitations are also the basis of its strength. Twitter serves as a speedy and direct platform able to bypass official state media oversight and the limitations on free speech by authoritarian governments. In the Middle East, in particular, it is nearly the

only path for different social groups to get their messages across without government interference.

The power of Twitter in transmitting onsite and immediate reporting was highlighted in the months leading up to the Iranian presidential elections and in the subsequent demonstrations against the falsification of the results. Along with other on-line social networks, Twitter served as an almost exclusive source for the unfolding events in the streets of Tehran.

However, Middle Eastern governments have not remained passive in the face of the rapid expansion of the new media, and particularly of on-line social networks that increase the possibilities for individual action and challenges to governments. Authorities around the region have invested considerable efforts in regulating and restricting these new means of communication. For example, the Dubai government partially blocked the use of the highly popular social networking Facebook website and the internet voice and video Skype program, claiming that their action was justified by "content that was not concurrent with the religious, cultural, political, and moral values of the United Arab Emirates." Iran has cracked down heavily on Twitter and other social networking sites. Not only has it blocked access to particular internet sites, it has also installed content filters and monitored traffic on them, thanks to Nokia Siemens Networks' (NSN) features. The ability to monitor internet and Nokia cellular phone traffic resulted in the arrests of a number of persons transmitting reports about the unfolding events in Iran, resulting in a consumer boycott in Iran of Nokia phones as an act of protest.

Time will tell regarding the impact of Twitter on the relations between Middle Eastern authoritarian governments and their citizens. In the meantime, Twitter has demonstrated a capacity to serve as a means for continuous and rapid dissemination of information among wide sectors of the population. To be sure, this alone cannot bring about far-reaching social change or a fundamental expansion of political and social freedom, but it certainly carries much potential, and even inspires hope among long-disenfranchised and cynical Middle Eastern publics.

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