

## COMMENTARY

**Read My Tweet on Iran**

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Technology creates new sources of power. Network technologies diffuse power. New networking technologies erode traditional means of political control and create new kinds of politics. The effect can be immediate—as when Falun Gong supporters used e-mail to organize simultaneous demonstrations across China. Or it can play out over years—as individuals reshape societies when they take advantage of digital connections.

Even countries that make tremendous efforts to suppress the political effect of new technologies and extend government control into cyberspace are not immune. China has invested billions in suppressive technologies, but its “netizens” engage in political debates that the Communist Party cannot truly control. Iran has also tried to suppress the political effect of digital networks, but with less success than China, a failure perhaps best illustrated when Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad fired the head of Iran’s state telecom company after “accidentally” receiving an anonymous text message on the presidential mobile phone that joked about his failure to bathe regularly. Ahmadinejad announced that the message was part of a Mossad plot to undermine his regime. He now faces a much more serious problem as Iranians use mobile network technologies—including cell phone cameras—to organize themselves and to inform each other and the world of government violence.

Democratic societies deal with dissent and disagreement through debate and inclusion in the political process. They do not suppress alternative points of view or information that contradicts government policies. Nondemocratic governments do not have similar mechanisms for dealing with dissent or debate. They must suppress opposing views. The techniques of physical repression have been refined over millennia, but beginning in the 1980s, new technologies began to erode government control, when fax machines and photocopiers made the self-publication of documents, which governments had tried to restrict, available to a wide audience.

The latest iterations are Internet-based “social networking” tools. Their use, in combination with the World Wide Web and with satellite television, reduces government control of information. The 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India, demonstrated their appeal. Guests in the besieged hotel used mobile devices to provide updates. That someone caught in a gun battle in a burning hotel would stop to send an e-mail or “tweet”—a short message sent over a social networking site—shows the new technologies’ powerful attraction. These messages at first increased the horror of the attacks but ultimately reinforced a sense of connection with Mumbai and repugnance for the attackers. The same social networking phenomenon is apparent now in Iran. The world hears not of an anonymous protestor killed by police, perhaps meriting a line on page A17 of the local newspaper; rather, it is Neda Agha Soltan, a young bystander shot, on camera, by Basij paramilitaries.

Networks have unexpected political effects. Those effects can be described as “democratic,” if by democratic we mean mass participation in the political process, but they are not necessarily democratic in the sense of a blanket endorsement of Western values. The digital networks provide new ways to organize, to inform, and to challenge the traditional means of control. The fear for nondemocratic governments, which lack the flexibility to absorb spontaneous political change, is that

ad hoc groupings that spring up for protest and information sharing will evolve into formal opposition. Widely separated individuals and groups can now coalesce over digital networks. The Iranian diaspora is intimately connected to the current protests in Tehran against a dubious election. The digital environment creates a global debate where ideas can be shared or disputed and, in this instance, where the moral bankruptcy of the 1979 Revolution is apparent to millions around the globe.

Government leaders face competition from political elites or from other nations, but also from new actors and new layers of competition for legitimacy and allegiance. The resulting changes are not what some early technologists predicted—we are not seeing the withering of the state or a new utopia of self-expression and liberty. Instead, the result is a crowded global stage in which governments continue to play major roles but must contend with other actors for loyalty and support. The result is turbulence and new challenges, but you only need fear these if you fear openness and debate.

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