

Another Canada Day is in the books as we move toward Canada's 150th birthday in 2017. For all of our supposed self-awareness of how great our country is, the events in Iran over the past three weeks have shown us how special and stable our democracy -- for all of its faults -- really is.

While the deaths of university students and others from police crackdowns are tragic, nonetheless, it has been inspiring to watch the Iranian people yearn for a fair election process, result and true democracy. And their use of social media, especially Twitter, to organize protests, communicate with the outside world and openly defy an oppressive regime could mark a historic turning point for the empowering force of technology in the global democratic movement.

Up until now, Twitter has been used mostly for society's incessant fascination with celebrity voyeurism, for mainstream media bulletins, and for communication by the under- 30 crowd.

Yes, the Obama campaign effectively used YouTube, Twitter, Flickr and other social media platforms (as did the Republicans) in the 2008 presidential election, but this foray into the many-to-many communication universe was for the most singularly focused on one outcome -- an Obama victory.

In Iran, the recent use of social media forced the government to try, with some success, to disrupt and shut down local service providers (ISPs), Wi-Fi spots and the like. But the Internet is now like water, it will always find the cracks and seep through. Moreover, ISPs in Europe and North America were quick to establish proxy servers to keep unfiltered information -- the lifeblood of 21st-century revolutions -- moving.

CELLPHONE TWEETS

And Twitter is also unique as one only requires a cell phone to send and receive messages of 140 characters or less. The web interface is only required if one wants to track all individual tweets or view multiple streams of tweets on the same subject. The Iranian government, let alone any government, cannot control information when this technology is ubiquitous amongst the populace.

While the 2009 Iranian revolution is destined to be relegated in the history books to a diminished stature of a summer uprising, the stage has been set for social media's prominence in future flash-points where people are fighting for real change. Instructively, the Iranian experience and events here at home have also magnified the relevance of the mainstream media, contrary to those who predict its doom.

While we can now watch the news unfold on our TV sets, phones and desktops in real-time, the sheer volume of inputs and feeds makes the need for fact checking, verification of authenticity and aggregating developments into context all the more important. And this is a task for which the craft of traditional journalists (print, radio and TV), newsroom editors, and yes, columnists, are well suited.

Similarly, the instantaneous daily blogging from Ottawa Mayor Larry O'Brien's trial on influence peddling -- by no less than four mainstream media organizations and zero of the much over-hyped independent bloggers -- is only half of the story. These episodic elements of the case still need to be woven into the larger thematic picture of the case as a whole in determining what actually transpired. Again, this is a role tailor-made for the journalistic profession from which many of us in turn will draw our own conclusions.

Make no mistake about it, social media is not just another media format such as records, cassettes, CDs, DVDs, MP3 s, etc., it is still an embryonic and developing frontier which citizens, the media and government need to better understand and harness for their own specific purposes.

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