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Twitter, Facebook, Flickr overcome foreign media ban Twitter is critical tool for Iran's activists



Activists are using cell phones and the internet to post real-time information on the protests to Twitter

DUBAI (Courtney C. Radsch)

If they can't televise, they'll Twitterize.

Iranian activists are using Twitter, the microblog accessible by internet and mobile phone, to provide real-time information and overcome the government's attempts to prevent coverage of the ongoing protests over President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad's reelection.

Twitter, perhaps more than any other media, has become a critical tool for activists as the government has sought to cut communication in the capital by shutting down the mobile phone network, blocking access to the Internet and banning the foreign media from covering the largest protests in decades.

"It appears to be one of few ways we outside of Iran are receiving news from inside Iran," Renee Redman, Executive Director of the Connecticut-based Iran Human Rights Documentation Center told Al Arabiya.

So when Twitter announced Monday it would temporarily suspend the service for an hour the next day it immediately spurred a wave of requests not to take away what has become a key communication and organizational tool for post-election activism.

"@twitter Twitter is currently our ONLY way to communicate overnight news in Iran, PLEASE do not take it down," wrote Mousavi1388, a feed with nearly 11,000 followers that serves as a virtual newsroom, providing information about protests and press conferences.

People began posting tweets, as the 140 character messages are known, about the need to prevent the planned outage Tuesday, said Redman. And shortly after 4 p.m. Monday, Tuesday morning in Iran, the company announced it would suspend the planned upgrade in acknowledgement of its role in facilitating

communication in and out of Iran.

San Francisco-based Twitter said it had decided to postpone a "critical network upgrade" because of "the role Twitter is currently playing as an important communication tool in Iran."

The U.S. Department of State said Tuesday it stressed to Twitter that it was an "important form of communication in Iran."

State Department Ian Kelly confirmed that the state department had consulted with Twitter and was "monitoring the situation through a number of different media, including social media networks like Facebook and Twitter."

Twitter feeds not only include links to pictures and videos of Monday's demonstration in support of defeated reformist candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi in Tehran and concurrent protests held in Shiraz, Asfahan and other cities off limit to the press, but also instructions for how to use proxies to avoid government censors.

Messages with #IranElection, a tag that enables users to search for all tweets on that subject, was the most popular tag on Twitter Tuesday, with more than 70 new posts a minute coming in Tuesday night. Tehran was the second most popular.

Media monopoly

The social networking site Facebook, which is currently blocked in Iran, and the photo sharing site Flickr have also become indispensable tools for circumventing government attempts to control coverage of the increasingly violent protests by pulling foreign press credentials Tuesday, forcing many to leave the country in an attempt to control coverage, and arresting journalists.

On Monday Iranian activists successfully launched a denial of service attack – promoted on Facebook and Twitter -- that crashed several official Iranian news sites.

Mousavi's Facebook page, which lists his current position as "president" of Iran, has more than 54,000 members posting pictures and videos that are helping to document the largest protests since the 1979 Islamic revolution as well as government violence that has left at least eight activists dead.

"This is an interesting time to see how the government has a monopoly on the media," Karim Abdian, Executive Director of the Ahwaz Education and Human Rights Foundation, told Al Arabiya, noting that he had spoken with several foreign journalists who were unable to leave their hotels Tuesday.

The media rights group Reporters Without Borders classifies Iran as one of 12 'Enemies of the Internet' and ranked it 166th out of 174 countries in terms of press freedom last year.

"The blogs are very helpful to explain what is going on in Iran; blogging is extremely active now and the other opposition groups are, through their blogs, trying to instruct the people about their policies and activities," added Abdian.

But blogs and Twitter feeds can also be seen by governmental authorities, prompting a campaign Tuesday evening to encourage people around the world to change their profiles to help protect activists in Iran.

"Help cover the bloggers: change your twitter settings so that your location is TEHRAN and your time zone is GMT +3.30" read the tweets sent by hundreds of users in an effort to make it more difficult for

the government to track down those blogging inside Iran.

“The campaign is to prevent Iranian authorities from tracking down those posting on twitter,” said Redman. “I think the reason they’ve been unable to shut it down is because it is so minor, in a way, just these little posts, and there’s not one source, it’s coming from the internet and cell phones.”

This is certainly not the first time Twitter has helped activists organize mass demonstrations. In April the anti-government protests in Moldova that drew thousands of youth were labeled a “Twitter Revolution” while activists in Egypt have been using the microblog to publicize human rights abuses and arrests and organize collective action.