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Iran protests are "coming of age" for social media Google, Facebook move up launches in Persian



Google launched its automated translation service in Persian as Facebook also launched a Persian platform

DUBAI (Courtney C. Radsch)

Google launched its Persian automatic translation service Friday just hours after Facebook announced a beta-version of the social networking site, because of the ongoing protests in Iran over election results that gave incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a second term.

“We feel that launching Persian is particularly important now, given ongoing events in Iran. Like YouTube and other services, Google Translate is one more tool that Persian speakers can use to communicate directly to the world, and vice versa — increasing everyone's access to information.” Franz Och, principal scientist, wrote on the company's blog.

The California-based company, which also owns the video sharing site YouTube, moved up the launch of its 42nd language in beta version as did Facebook.

Och said Google was “launching this service quickly, so it may perform slowly at times,” adding that it was optimized for English-Farsi translations.

Facebook, popular with reformists who used it to build support for their candidate and disseminate information after the results, announced late Thursday night that the site would be available in Farsi, allowing Iranian users to navigate in their native language.

“Since the Iranian election last week, people around the world have increasingly been sharing news and information on Facebook about the results and its aftermath,” Eric Kwan, a Facebook engineer working to localize the site, wrote on Facebook's official blog.

“Persian was already in translation before worldwide attention turned to the Iranian elections, but because of the sudden increase in activity we decided to launch it sooner than planned. This means that

the translation isn't perfect, but we felt it was important to help more people communicate rather than wait," said Facebook.

Kwan said the beta Farsi version would automatically load on browsers whose default setting was set to Persian or could be changed to the Facebook default via the application's settings menu.

"Most of the Iranians they cannot speak English so it's most important to them so they can contact people and use Facebook," said Azin Samarmand, an Iranian editor at Dubai-based MBC Group, Al Arabiya's parent company.

"It's a victory for them (the protesters) to get attention from all of these companies," she said, adding that there was a petition going around online urging Google to replace its standard logo with a pro-reformist green one for a day in support of their cause.

YouTube relaxes restrictions

Google also relaxed restrictions on violent and graphic videos from the protests in Iran posted to YouTube in recognition of the critical role user-generated content was playing in the country, where foreign media have been banned from covering the largest protests since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

YouTube said it would loosen its policy to allow graphic and violent videos from the protest saying that limitations on "mainstream media reporting from within Iran make it even more important that citizens in Iran be able to use YouTube to capture their experiences for the world to see."

Getting around censorship

Despite the Iranian government's attempts to block communication in the capital by shutting down Iran's main cellular phone network, blocking SMS messages and blocking reformist websites, Facebook and the microblog Twitter, Iranians have successfully used proxy servers to get around government filters.

The Pirate Bay, a popular file-sharing site, launched an Internet network to help users avoid the censorship and assist them in hiding their internet locations via an anonymity system, while people around the world offered up their computers as proxies for use by Iranian activists.

And thus far the Iranian public has succeeded in continuing its steady stream of information out of the country – especially via Twitter -- which in turn is picked up by Western journalists and news organizations, underscoring how citizen journalism on social media has become a crucial source for journalists.

Coming of age for social media

"It's a coming of age for Twitter as a news device," ABC News' Jim Sciutto told Al Arabiya in Dubai after being forced to leave Iran because of an expired visa. "You don't wait for your news, you can't."

He said he assesses the credibility and veracity of user-generated content based on where it came from, whether what is shown is possible or could have been staged, what other content shows and of course what he saw with his own eyes.

The visas of most foreign journalists, typically granted for seven days, ran out earlier in the week and were not renewed in an attempt by the government to control coverage of the largest demonstrations since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

“It’s always difficult for the Western press,” said Sciutto. “But it’s a lot harder this time.”