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Twitterers and Tyrants: Evaluating the Role of Twitter in the Authoritarian Setting

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Social Media and Authoritarianism:

Exploring Twitter in Iran and China

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With thanks to Professors Karl Fields and Patrick O'Neil

- What impact does social media have on the organization and activism of pro-democracy groups in authoritarian states?

- In particular, what impact has Twitter had in recent uprisings in Iran and China?

    – Presidential Election Riots, Iran (June 2009)

    – Urumqi Riots, China (July 2009)

Guiding Questions

- The primary data gathered for this project came in the form of archived Tweets with the #Iranelection hash-tag from June of 2009 and June of 2010.

- There were 35 sets of 20 tweets from 2010, and 50 sets of 20 tweets from 2009.

- Tweets were analyzed and recorded for time, location (where possible), language, topic, and frequency.

Methodology

- Secondary data included Google Trends data, news articles, and other quantitative studies of Twitter.

- In observing the Urumqi riots of 2009, I was forced to depend on news sources, both because of issues with Twitter's archives, and because of a paucity of discussion.

Methodology (ctd.)

- First and foremost, Twitter played little to no role in the actual events in Iran.
  - 97.1% of Tweets in June of 2009 were in English.
  - A mere 2.2% were in Persian. In total, that summed to less than 800 tweets a day in Persian.
  - Prime-time for use of the hash-tag did not differ from Twitter's American-centric prime-time.
  - Use was focused in "Meta" discussions and discussions News and International Organization.
  - At most, less than 20,000 unique users from Iran were using Twitter.

Findings – Iran, 2009
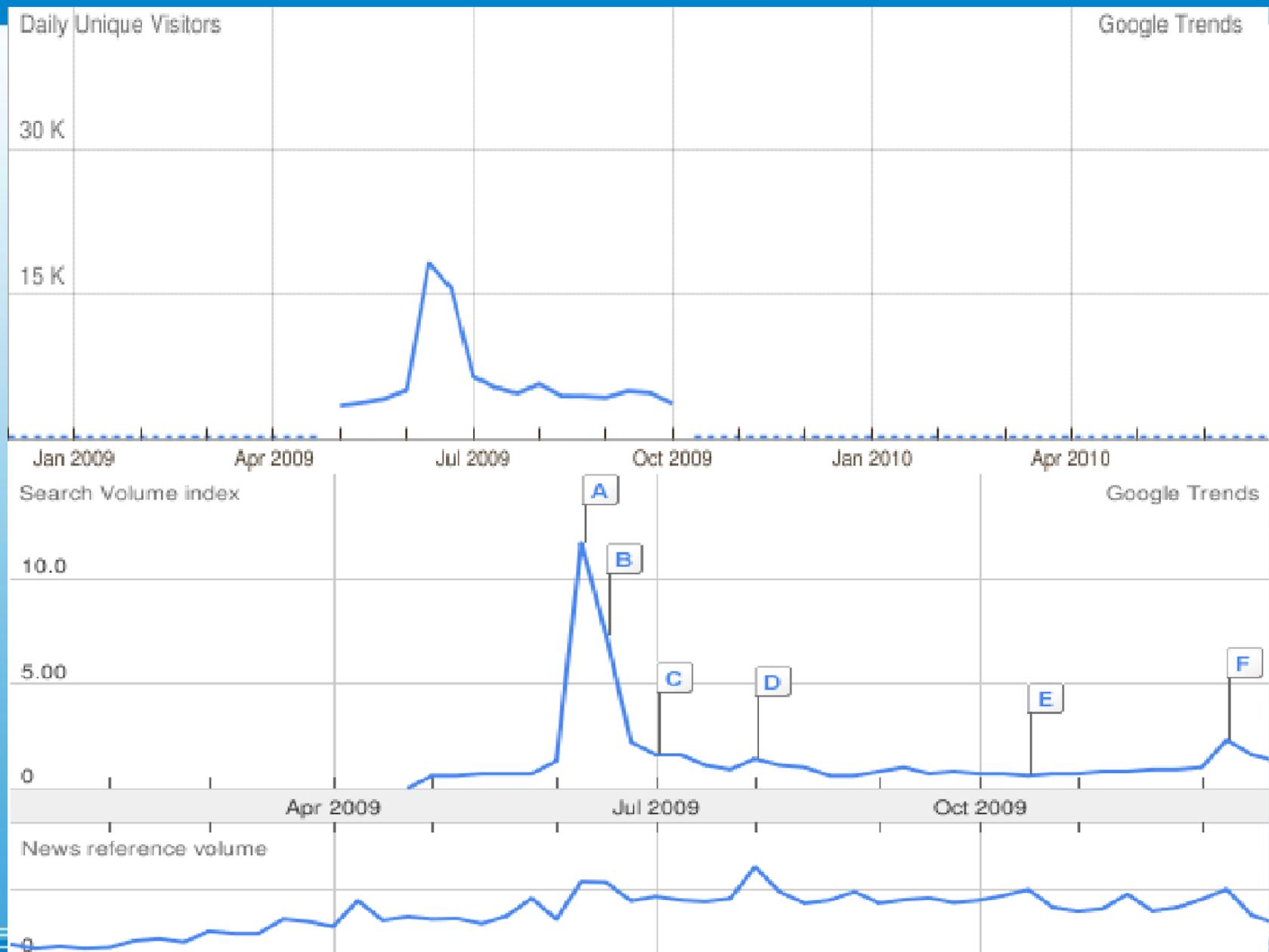
Findings – Iran, 2009

- Microblogging, as a service, has more of a history in China.

  - Services like QQ, an online chat program, are quite common.

- Twitter's role in the Urumqi riots was significantly different from its role in Iran

  - Relatively little use.

  - A tweet was the first report of violence in the city.

  - The Chinese state media was forced to respond to reports coming out of the city.

  - Opposition bloggers used Twitter to leak footage, counter to the government narrative.

Findings – Urumqi, 2009

- Twitter was quickly shut down, in response to its misuse.

    - Twitter could not be "harmonized", unlike Chinese sites.

- Microblogging constitutes a unique challenge to the "Great Firewall" model, because it undermines the state's news monopoly.

Findings – Urumqi, 2009

- YouTube was used in both cases, and has also been used in recent riots in Kazakhstan and coastal China.

- YouTube turns every cell-phone into a news camera, and every civilian into a reporter.

- We can see examples of this in the case of Neda, reports of Basij brutality over the holiday of Ashura, videos of riots in the Chinese city of Shishou, and the ongoing unrest in Kazakhstan.

Findings – YouTube Effect

- Keck and Sikkink (1998) define the boomerang effect as a political group denied redress in one state sending information to NGOs in other states, who in turn push their government to pressure the original state to comply with the first group.

- The question, then, is if activists in Iran or China can use social media to create the boomerang effect, or to better mobilize international opposition to authoritarianism.

- American activists did protest events in Iran, but I see little reason to believe there was a boomerang effect.

Findings – A Boomerang Effect?

- There is still significant use of #Iranelection, but it is no longer a trending topic.

- Persian language use now makes up 20.3% of tweets.

- News now outweighs all other topics, making up the majority of discussion.

  – In particular, news discussions center around new state abuses, and the activists facing execution.

- Prime-time hasn't changed significantly, suggesting that the new users are still primarily American.

- I believe that the data indicates a growing expatriate community, using Twitter to create an expatriate network.

Findings – Iran, 2010

- Twitter was not used by Iranian activists in June of 2009.

- Twitter was, however, used by Uighur activists to counter the state-news apparatus, during the Urumqi riots.

- Areas for future work include more extensive statistical exploration of the tweet archives, since my numbers are still rather large, exploration of YouTube and the boomerang effect, and an investigation of the role of Twitter in expatriate communities.

Conclusions

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