

❖ **Kamalipour, Yahya R. (Ed.) - *Media, Power, and Politics in the Digital Age: The 2009 Presidential Election Uprising in Iran*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Maryland, 2010, pp 340, ISBN: 978-1442204157**

Reviewed by Tim Hamlett

The Iranian revolution that wasn't, is over. The secret policemen have had their ball, the vultures have had their fill, and now, if you have the stomach for it, here come the communication scholars to pick over the remains. In these days when academic workloads are a controversial issue, let us note first that this book is a formidable piece of academic productivity. There are 26 research outputs by 33 authors packed into nearly 300 pages of text. Here's a toast to book chapters.

On the central question of whether this enterprise achieves what it sets out to do, the news is not so good. The main title "Media, power and politics in the digital age", suggests a degree of universality which is not attempted here. The subtitle "The 2009 presidential election uprising in Iran", suggests that we might be offered a history of recent events in Iran, but that does not really materialise either.

Editor Yahya Kamalipour offers – in a well-written and well-intentioned introduction – a list of 11 things the book is intended to do, for another list of seven possible audiences. Maybe we are trying to please too many people too much of the time. Hats off to Professor Kamalipour, though, for persuading most of his writers to deploy a good, clear, English style. Gobbledygook creeps in occasionally, but overall this is a readable collection, though obviously quite varied in accent. This reader would have wished more uniformity to have been imposed on the spelling of Persian and Arabic words.

Clearly, in such a multifarious collection, most readers will find parts they like and parts they don't. To some extent, this depends on what you already know. I was not enthralled by some routine chapters on how various media covered the unrest, but having had little to do with Turkey recently, I found Banu Akdenizli's rundown of the Turkish media quietly fascinating.

Some of the contributors flatly contradict each other. For example in Chapter 13, Li Xiguang and Wang Jing deploy the Chinese net nutters' conspiracy theory (it was all an American plot) in its full glory, while two chapters later, a *troika* of American-based scholars complain that the main obstacle to the use of social media to bring change in Iraq is over-enthusiastic American sanctions.

The intentions of Neda Agha-Soltan (whose name is variously spelled), who achieved instant global fame by dying on YouTube after being shot by the regime's thugs, are treated to a wide variety of interpretations. Was she a demonstrator, was she a student, was she a symbol of Western womanhood, or Westernised womanhood? Setareh Sabety answers some of these questions in an interesting analysis of the semiotics of Iranian fashion.

Other writers seem to expect rather a lot. Sareh Afshar complains that "the international media failed to see the pleading look in her eyes as she lay on the pavement." That may be so, but under the circumstances it seems more likely that the pleading was for medical help rather than political reform.

On the great question – what difference do the digital media make – you can take your pick from a variety of conclusions. Of course, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that the predictions of an imminent major upheaval were overblown, or over-optimistic. Jonathan Acuff rightly points out that some American media and think tanks are all too willing to announce a revolution, especially in countries of whose regimes they disapprove. On the other hand, numerous recent revolutions have burst upon us unadvertised by the scholars who were supposed to be authorities in the affairs of the countries concerned. So, it is difficult to share Mr Acuff's confidence in the idea that if there is such a thing as a "revolutionary situation", then academics are better at spotting it than journalists. Still, we see enough to conclude that the social media are now, in their turn, a clear threat to authoritarian regimes everywhere, as new media tend to be. No doubt, these authoritarian regimes are well aware of this and preparing counter-measures even as we speak. As China's netizens have discovered, the people who sold you digital liberation are equally willing to sell the local 'gestapo' the software which will put you in the Gulag for the rest of your life.

For the international media, YouTube is a new source, and one that cannot (yet, at least), be kicked out of the country. I

suppose correspondent-deprived countries were covered in the old days, rather slowly, by talking to refugees, diplomats and business visitors. Now the 24-hour news cycle can roll on uninterrupted provided that you don't mind relying on amateur footage. Whether this is good news or bad news remains to be seen.

As for the revolution, I fear nobody is ever going to achieve violent change on Facebook. Clearly large numbers of people participated vicariously in the Iranian upheaval by reading posts, viewing videos, visiting websites and even signing online letters and petitions. These activities were emotionally rewarding for those who participated in them but had not the slightest effect on the real world. On the Internet nobody can tell when you're revolting. You can leverage the new media in domestic politics by using it for fundraising and getting the vote out. An effect on international politics is more elusive. I do not suggest that there will never be one, but there is no sign of one here.

On the whole this book is inconsistent in its content and uncertain in its navigation, probably a necessary consequence of its interestingly multiple authorship. For a reviewer required by fairness to start at one end and finish at the other, it is a long journey. Readers who can afford to skip the parts they already know, or don't want to know, will find many interesting moments in the rest of the book. Teachers of journalism will find numerous useful pieces on a variety of topics in mercifully small packages. I suppose it will be difficult to find the book in Iran, which may be just as well. As far as that unhappy country is concerned, one is not left with much about which to feel optimistic.

About the Reviewer

Tim Hamlett is a Professor in Journalism at Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong. In the UK, he worked as a journalist for a variety of publications, including the *Derby Evening Telegraph*, *Newcastle Journal* and *The Guardian*. In Hong Kong, he worked for the *Standard* and the *South China Morning Post*. Professor Hamlett broadcasts occasionally for RTHK, as presenter of *The Week in Politics*.

Global Media Journal © 2011