Responding to Crises on Facebook: A Case Study of the Iranian Election Protests and the
2010 Chilean Earthquake


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**Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review**

In the past year, two major crises have rocked the international community. In Iran, violent protests erupted on the streets of Tehran following its presidential elections in June 2009. In February 2010, an earthquake measuring 8.8 on the Richter scale struck Chile, killing more than 400 people and causing four to seven billion dollars in damage. In each situation, social media were widely used, and seemed to play a crucial role in the dissemination of information and generation of support for the victims.

In this thesis, I conducted a case study evaluating the role social media played in generating support for, and raising awareness of, the crises in both Chile and Iran. Specifically, I examined Facebook groups created by users living in Iran and Chile at the time, in response to the disasters. I analyzed the groups' stated purposes, how they seemed to work towards that purpose, and how each group positioned itself in relation to traditional media, if it mentioned such media at all. For the purpose of this thesis, traditional media will be defined as a large, established news media institution that delivers information via print, online, television or radio to more than 10,000 subscribers or viewers, such as for example CNN, al Jazeera or Chile's *El Mercurio* newspaper.

The 2010 Chilean earthquake, and Iran's political protests in 2009 are two very different events. One is political, and one is natural. However, I chose to study both because each had very different aspects. By studying a political and natural crisis, I sought to gain insight into the entire spectrum of possibilities when it came to the use of social media in

crises. I believe studying a range of crisis situations will present fuller results and add more value to the body of research on social media and crises.

It is important to understand what role social media play in disseminating information, raising awareness, and generating support in crisis situations, for further knowledge will lead to a maximization of its effectiveness and a better understanding of 21st-century media. For example, perhaps by understanding the role social media played in the Iranian election crisis, we can work to build stronger social media tools for other countries to utilize in oppressive political situations to fight for freedom. In natural disasters, effectively utilizing social media tools may have the ability to generate further aid and awareness for disaster victims, and consequently, potentially save lives. Additionally, the role of social media in political and natural crises has implications for the flow of information globally and its impact on foreign policy. Some say its impact means foreign policy will never again be the same (Viner, 2009), because ordinary citizens have the opportunity to spread information over a mass medium.

So far, little research has been done on the influence of social media in crisis situations. Academic research on social media has primarily focused on the reasons behind its use and online behaviors of social media users. This study will begin to fill a gap in literature that will lead to a better understanding of how social media in the 21st century functions in the wake or midst of a crisis. As discussed below, my research suggests that social media can effectively function as a space where users can interact and discuss information relayed by traditional media—not so much replacing the newsgathering and distributing role of the news media as adding an interactive dimension to it with great

potential for social change. Most importantly, social media can function as a global public sphere, by enabling individuals from across the world to access the same information and add their voice to discussions surrounding that information.

**Social Media and Social Change**

Research surrounding online social media has mainly focused on how it impacts social capital, relationships, why people use it, and how they present themselves on it. (Ellison et al., 2007; Stutzman, 2005; Joinson, 2008). Specific research has been done on motivations behind Twitter usage and communities (Java et al., 2007) as well as Facebook (Ellison et al., 2007). Java et al. discovered that individuals use Twitter to share information and talk about their daily activities. Ellison et al.'s study found a strong association between a user's Facebook usage and bridging social capital, or in other words, building connections between social groups who might not otherwise have interacted offline.

Little research has been done on social media and social change or activism. An even smaller amount of research has been done on whether or not these sites promote democracy and freedom of expression, and if so, the conditions behind and discourse on these sites that promote freedom of expression. The majority of the academic literature addressing the issue has merely been speculative. Seib (2008) argues that new media, including the new Arab-channel phenomenon Al-Jazeera, are pushing the boundaries of freedom of expression, in countries that do not allow it, as never before. "In Egypt," Seib argues, "opposition groups that are ignored by state-run media are sustained by blogs" (p.

xi). He claims the same is true in China, where the government tries to monitor expression on the Internet, but with 220 million Internet users and around 47 blog writers, "the government's watchers cannot keep up" (p. xi).

While there may be minimal research so far about the relatively new phenomenon of social media, however, research on communication points to the idea that social media may be an effective agent for social change.

For example, Rogers concluded that effective communication is muldirectional (2003), meaning it reaches out and functions in more than one direction. When people have the ability to discuss information, ask questions and apply information in a social context, that information is more likely to lead to increased knowledge (Brown & Adler, 2008). Additionally, research has found that interpersonal communication is directly related to political and civic participation, and issue recall (McLeod et al., 1999, Zhang et al., 2009, Sundar et al., 2003)—findings that suggest, when applied to disasters and political crises, that online social media communication might have an effect on real world relief efforts for disasters, or support in political crises. Mass media are useful for generating initial interest in an issue, but social media sites provide a forum where users can interact in various ways. Those who were traditionally at the receiving end of a message now have the opportunity to be actively engaged in disseminating and creating the message (Anderson-Wilk, 2009). Addtionally, the United Nation's Food and Agricultural Organization concluded that individuals are more likely to apply information if they feel they were part of the experience of communicating that information (2006), and Rogers noted that communication networks played an essential role in the adoption of

innovations (2003). On sites such as Facebook, individuals are given the chance to be actively involved in the dissemination of information as they can react and discuss information as soon as it is communicated, which suggests that Facebook can indeed be an inducement for ordinary people to become factors for social change.

Based on the above, Anderson-Wilk stated, in regards to social media, "these technologies have the potential to help fulfill communication's role as an engine of social change and to do so more effectively than traditional communication efforts because of the social, participatory and engaging nature of new media" (2009). Social networking sites can provide strategic communication capable of mobilizing individuals and raising awareness of issues (p. 129).

Researchers at the International Institute for Sustainable Development state that three critical technologies of social media enable it to potentially be a significant force for sustainability, meaning sustainable economic, political and social development in developing countries: "The prevelance of handheld computing and communication devices, the ease with which individuals can find, post and comment on each other's videos, images words and other content, and the potential of social networking sites including Twitter, Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn" (2009). Therefore, literature on social media suggests that social media, such as Facebook, could play a key role in influencing sustainable freedom of expression in Iran, or effective disaster response in Chile.

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In their study of social media and the post-election crisis in Kenya, Maairt Makinen and Mary Wangu Kuira (2008) observed that social media played a notable role in maintaining political engagement while traditional media was banned. Social media tools enabled a new level of citizen participation in engaging in the situation and displayed the importance of social media as a "horizontal form of information sharing" (p. 329). "Social media tools have opened up new possibilities for citizens to share their views in public and discuss the situation with other citizens and people globally" (2008). Makinen and Wangu argue that new possiblities were widened because social media provided an alternative public sphere for communication. The researchers note that social media supplements traditional media, rather than replacing it, and that it is significant in times of political crisis because it is a "channel of expression that cannot be easily controlled by the ruling power" (p. 333). Iranians found themselves in a similar situation during the 2009 political protests. Makinen and Wangu's study illustrates that perhaps in Iran's political crisis, too, social media could be used as way to dodge censorship imposed by Iranian authorities.

However, the researchers note the limits of social media due to class disparities. For most Kenyans, access to the Internet is not an option, and thus they are still reliant on traditional media. There is a need to make social media technology more widely available across classes. Both the rich and the poor should have access to social media to maximize its effectiveness as a tool for political and social development. Additionally, Makinen and Wangu conclude that, whether or not "discussions flowing from grassroots affect the power and the state of democracy remains unexplored (2008)." I believe there is a need

for future research to examine whether or not social media really can bring power to the people and challenge ruling authorities.

Shaheen (2008) conducted a similar study investigating the use of social media and political activism during Pakistan's political crises in 2007, and the state of emergency declared by its government on November 3, 2007. He focused his research on the use of online social networks by Pakistani university students, and concluded Internet use by students "promoted democracy, freedom of expression and greater awareness about their rights during the political crises in Pakistan" (2008). Clark (2009) noted sites such as Twitter are being used as a tool for political action against governments. He cited protests in Moldova and Iran as examples. The situation in Iran was similar to that in Pakistan. Therefore, Shaheen's and Clark's studies suggest that social media may have promoted freedom of expression and democracy in Iran during its political crisis.

In studying civic partipation and social media in the United States, researchers found that reliance on online social networking sites for political campaign information was positively related to civic participation (Zhang et al, 2009). Scholars have noted the rising role of social media in social activism. Jenkins (2007) theorized that social media site YouTube, which allows users to post short videos, "may embody a particular opportunity for translating participatory culture into civic engagement." For example, the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, invited YouTube users to get involved by enabling them to interact with world leaders at the forum, who were asked to reply to YouTube users' questions at a special YouTube corner in the conference center.

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Specifically related to the case study of Iranian election protests is research on the role of social media in Iran. Semati (2008) noted that interactive online sites like blogs provide a forum for users, particularly female users, to freely express alternative views, and a forum for Iranians to report on government corruption. However, Semati also noted that the Internet, online social networking sites included, provided an opportunity for the government to exert new means of control. For example, during Iran's political protests, Iranian authorities were able to track down Twitter users expressing dissent throught their IP addresses; authorities then shut down or arressted these users, making Twitter another way in which Iranian authorities could exert cotnrol.

**Social Media and Disaster/Crisis Response**

Research has shown that social media is playing a new and significant role in communication during and after non-political crises too (Palen et al, 2007, Palen and Liu, 2007, Fenton, 2008). For example, Palen and Liu found that individuals discovered the names of victims of the Virginia Tech shootings, well before officials did, by collaborating online. Palen et al. (2009) state that "social media applications such as social networking apps like Facebook, Flickr, MySpace and messaging services like Twitter serve as a new means for disaster survivors, various onlookers and compassionate helpers to find info and assist others" (p. 468).

Social media is increasingly testing conventional crisis response activities as it enables grassroots organization and "citizen journalism information reporting" (Gillmore, 2006). Farnham, Pederson and Kirkpatrick (2006) discovered that during crisis response and

recovery, individuals were more likely to use social media to tap their social capital and exploit preexisting social networks to become more aware of the situation surrounding them.

In studying public communication during the October 2007 California wildfire, Sutton et al. discovered that backchannel and community information resources enabled by social media are increasingly playing a prominent role in disaster communication. Social media allows for wide-scale interactions that can generate information otherwise hard to obtain, such as the location of a missing pet, or the specific homes damaged in an individual's neighborhood (2008).

Que et al. (2008) studied the use of a social media site after an earthquake in China in May 2008 that killed about 70,000 people. Their results suggest that citizens used the site for similar reasons to those using social media after the California wildfires. Citizens visited the site, "seeking info about their homes, hometowns and families, and coordinating action to help victims of crisis" (p. 377). This is new, because traditional mass media does not allow for individuals to retrieve such specific, localized and personal information, as it caters to a mass audience.

Palen et al. (2009) examined the use of social media during and in the aftermath of the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings. They disovered social media enabled new opportunities for individuals to interact within and outside the spacial confines of a crisis event. In a highly networked world, "social arrangements of emergency have a potential for significant change. Although crises will almost always have geographical connections

that require certain social interactions to happen, much information production vis a vis the event no longer has those bounds" (pg. 477).

At the other end of the spectrum, research suggests that online groups can also serve to sustain geographic community during disasters (Procorpio et al., 2004). "Internet users in a crisis situation went online to seek interactive information specific to their neighborhoods and to activiate weak ties in social networks" (p. 67). So it seems that social media can be both hyperlocal and global at the same time. This may enable Facebook users in, for example, Iran to kill two birds with one stone by relaying information specific to their area, but at the same time relating such information to a global audience and thereby building wider support for their cause.

Research in the field of disasters and social media has also focused on user behavior. Palen (2008) found that behaviors associated with online social convergence after disasters include helping, anxiousness, returning, supporting, mourning, exploiters, being curious. Additionally, online groups formed after disasters were found to provide emotional and informational support (Procorpio et al., 2004). This research gives insight into the reasons why Facebook groups were created in wake of both the natural disaster in Chile, and the political crisis in Iran.

As mentioned above, while many scholars have theorized about the opportunity social media provides for social activism and freedom of expression, little research has been done that actually leads to conclusive results. While news media throughout the world have hailed the role social media played in enabling protest after the Iranian elections and

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enabling freedom of expression in places where governments repress it, no research has been published exploring how Facebook groups, specifically, were utilized to generate support and raise awareness of the crisis. Additionally, research has not explored the information role social media played compared to traditional news media. Therefore, the research conducted in this thesis is not only critical to offering new insights into the phenomenom of social media, but to using these insights to maximize the use of social media for promoting freedom of expression and change across the globe.

The rest of this study is organized in the following chapters: Chapter 2 builds the theoretical foundation for a study of social media's role in crisis situations; Chapter 3 presents the background of my selected case studies, and the methods I used to implement this study. Chapter 4 includes the findings, and chapter 5 presents the discussion and conclusion of this thesis.

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## Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

I employed Pierre Levy's theory of collective intelligence and Jurgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere in examining the role of Facebook groups after disasters, specifically the possibility that they might play a crucial role in the dissemination of information and generation of support for the victims because of their interactive nature.

## Collective Intelligence

Collective intelligence is a form of "universally distributed intelligence, constantly enhanced, coordinated in real-time and resulting in the effective mobilization of skills" (Levy, 1997). Levy's theory of collective intelligence derives from the thought that "no one knows everything, but everyone knows something" (p. 14).

Collective intelligence is constantly enhanced because of its universal distribution. For example, subjects in Wikipedia.org, the user-created online encyclopedia, are constantly enhanced as different viewers see flaws or omissions in the information presented. Levy also argues that collective intelligence must be coordinated in real-time and that therefore, the potential for effective use of collective intelligence increases when it is "based on digital information technologies" (p. 14). Sites such as Facebook or Twitter enable users to post and update information in real-time, or in other words, as events are actually happening. Collective intelligence results in skill mobilization because, first and foremost, it enables skills to be identified among individuals. When we acknowledge the skills of another, "we allow him to identify himself in terms of a new and positive mode

of being, help mobilize and develop feelings of recognition that will facilitate the subjective implication of other individuals in collective projects" (p. 15).

Collective intelligence states that online communities can put together their individual knowledge to create knowledge that would not exist in a single individual. What cannot be known alone can be known in "knowledge communities," the term Levy uses to describe users who organize to distribute information. Levy suggests that collective intelligence will allow individuals to gradually exert power over the status quo. For example, if users in Chile are able to post updates regarding the earthquake events in real time, no longer will individuals be forced to rely solely on dominant news organizations for information.

Knowledge communities have emerged as our engagement in more traditional forms of community are dissolving. Online communities are no longer strictly bound by physical geography or nationality, which might translate into less restricted material communities as well as some forms of action articulated online do impact actual activism. What these new communities are bound by, however, is the "mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 27). These communities are nurtured by "collective discussion, negotiation and development, and they prod the individual to seek out new information for the common good" (p. 27). This brings up questions of how such information flow will impact the global economy, and foreign policy. Perhaps it could change the way policy and economics are negotiated and articulated. Collective intelligence is not shared knowledge. Only some information is known by the entire knowledge community. The community's existence and health depends on the fact that

there will always be something not everyone knows, but someone who may have knowledge may be able to contribute that knowledge should the occasion arise.

Facebook groups seem to be an example of collective intelligence in action. Groups created to generate support and raise awareness of crises such as those in Chile or Iran often provide a space for members to discuss events and shared knowledge, and welcome new insight from individual users to further the goal of the group, whether it be an announcement as to how funds are helping a recovery effort, or how members can best support the group's particular cause. Facebook groups often allow a space where any member can offer knowledge, and the knowledge offered can be openly discussed with other members.

**Public Sphere**

Jurgen Habermas introduced his idea of the public sphere in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). Habermas' public sphere consists of a space where private individuals gather as a public to negogiate and articulate meanings. The public then uses the opinions and beliefs articulated in the public sphere to affirm or challenge the ruling state authorities -- and thus upset the balance of power.

Habermas explains that the public sphere began to emerge in the late 18th century, spurred by the growth of public houses, literary and volunteer societies and the rise of the press. Individuals began to gather in these places for rational, critical discourse, and consequently began to challenge the traditional public sphere wherein state authority's reign was accepted unconditionally among the people. The existence of a public sphere is

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generally considered to be crucial to the maintenance and prosperity of a democratic government. A healthy democracy "rests on the capacity of and opportunity for citizens to engage in enlightened debate" (Hauser, 1998, p. 85). Enlightened debate ideally takes place within the public sphere.

The emergence of the public sphere in Europe was dependent on a few key criteria --- which continue to be critical to the public sphere today. Habermas argues that the public sphere must ignore status, whether endowed by religion, gender or class. It must have a domain of common concern, meaning there must be an issue all individuals participating in the sphere are invested in. A public sphere must also be inclusive. Bourgeois society in 18th-century Europe upheld these three crtieria, thus developing an environment in which the public sphere could flourish. Two additional requirements for the success of the public sphere include a functioning rule of a law in a society and the quality of citizen participation (Souleg, 2008).

Habermas argues that the demise of the public sphere began with the rise of consumerism. Concern with consumption eroded individuals' political concerns, and the mass media, a critical component of the public sphere, became driven by capitalism, making it unfit for use as a neutral forum for political discussion.

My research suggests, however, that Habermas' argument about the demise of the public sphere might be premature; in fact, mass media continue to contribute to it and, in some ways, Facebook groups also function to maintain the public sphere even though they are not immune from consumeristic concerns and some measure of government influence.

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They provide a forum where individuals with a common concern can discuss issues and articulate meanings. Many are inclusive, allowing anyone interested to join. Additionally, Facebook groups provide an opportunity for individuals to create their own news and information and distribute them widely apart from traditional news media, thus challenging the authority of traditional media. Recently, traditional media, particularly news media, has been declining (Nichols & McChesney, 2009). It has been suggested that social media, such as Facebook, are contributing to this decline as anyone now has access to broadcast news and information, and paid information sources are no longer in demand (Chen, 2009).

Employing the theory of the public sphere in studying Facebook groups does present a problem, however. Facebook is owned by a corporation. Consequently, the forum in which individuals are discussing issues could easily be influenced by capitalist means, potentially eroding the legitimacy of public discussion of certain political issues. Despite the fact that Facebook is a corporate platform, I still believe that it provides a public sphere, as it enables individuals to discuss issues with minimal to no censorship. Therefore, even though the site treats its users as consumers, by targeting them with advertising, it inherently allows users to subvert that very consumerism-oriented order because of its lack of overt regulation and its ability to sustain a free space for discussion.

Overall, then, Facebook groups appear as a site for the creation and dissemination of collective intelligence, as well as an important addition to the kind of media space that the public sphere requires.

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## Chapter 3: Background and Method

## Online Social Media

Online social media sites, or online social networking sites, have become extremely popular in the first decade of the 21$^{st}$ century. Online social media sites are web-based tools that enable people to build public profiles within a bounded system, make connections with others within that system, and interact with those connections (Utz, 2009).

The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site. Twitter and Facebook are examples of social networking sites, along with sites such as YouTube, Flickr and MySpace.

Online social media is an extremely new media phenomenon. SixDegrees.com launched in 1997, and was the first social media site similar to those we know today. SixDegrees.com enabled users to create profiles, invite friends and organize groups. The site promoted itself as a venue for connecting with people (Boyd & Ellison 2007). Perhaps, as its creators claim, the site was ahead of its time, as it folded shortly after the new millennium (Nickson, 2009). Around the time SixDegrees sprung up other, more niche, social networking sites arose on the world wide web. These sites, which remain today, include BlackPlanet.com, AsianAvenue.com and MiGente.com, which targets Hispanic users.

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The current generation of online social media began to appear in 2002. Friendster offered

a refined version of SixDegree's concept. Designed to compete with the fledgling

Match.com, a dating service, Friendster promoted its "Circle of Friends," which used the

"idea that a rich online community can exist only between people who truly have

common bonds" (Nickson, 2009). The site operated on the assumption that "friends-of-

friends would make better romantic partners than strangers" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The

number of users on Friendster surged. Its popularity, however, eventually led to its

demise in the West. The site was not equipped to handle exponential growth, and soon

encountered social and technical difficulties. While the site is no longer popular in the

United States, it continues to have a large following in parts of Asia (Boyd & Ellison,

2007).

A year after Friendster's launch, LinkedIn and MySpace, sites still popular today, were

implemented and began to catch the digital wind. LinkedIn is a professional site,

dedicated to career networking. Today, it is home to 30 million members. MySpace

began in Santa Monica, Calif. It was launched to compete with sites like Friendster, and

initially differentiated itself by allowing users to design their own profile page (Nickson,

2009). Teenagers, who were not largely active on Friendster, began to enthusiastically

join MySpace, helping boost its users by a significant amount. Another aspect that

differentiates MySpace from other social networking sites is its relationship with bands.

The site was not designed with bands in mind, but it allowed users to post and listen to

music on their profile pages (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Soon, the site began to attract

musicians and artists, and became known for its variegated supply of music. A few

famous acts, such as Owl City, became famous simply from posting music on MySpace. It is MySpace's music niche that enables it to remain one of the primary social networking sites today.

A year after MySpace's launch, Facebook entered the social networking market, and currently reigns supreme over all other sites (Nickson, 2009).

**Facebook**

Facebook is an online social networking site started in 2004 by then-Harvard sophomore Mark Zuckerberg. Facebook users create personal profiles and connect with others' profiles by "friending" them. Facebook began as a site for college students only, but it since has expanded to allow anyone over age 13 to join. Facebook enables users to share messages, pictures, videos and music, and offers thousands of applications for various purposes. The site has been ranked as the most-used social networking site in the world, the second most popular website in the U.S., and currently boasts more than 400 million users (Axon, 2010). Facebook's success has been attributed to its function of bringing real-life, pre-existing social interactions into an online forum. Essentially, it provided a forum where people who were friends and acquaintances offline could continue their social interactions online. Therefore, initially, offline social behaviors drove Facebook's online usage. When it comes to Facebook's business, or how it profits, the site's success is due to its ability enable advertisers to penetrate into niche-communities (Gabbay, 2006). For example, advertisers can target college ads at Facebook users who state they are graduating from high school in their profile.

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Facebook has been met by its share of controversy. Authorities in China and Iran, for example, have intermittingly blocked the site for enabling individuals to express political dissent (Shahi, 2008; MacDonald, 2009). During the election protests of 2009, Iranian officials tried to shut down Facebook, as it provided a forum for Iranians to criticize the government, share information with the outside world and organize protests against the government. The first case study for this thesis closely examines the use of Facebook by Iranians during the protests, in which opposition supporters protested the results of an election claiming President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad victorious.

**Case Study 1: 2009 Iranian Election Protests**

**Iran's Political History**

The political history of Iran dates back to sixth century B.C., when the Medes first established their empire on the grounds of modern-day Iran. In 559 B.C., Cyrus the Great turned the Persian empire into the largest of its time. Although its boundaries changed throughout the years, Iran was known as Persia for centuries. It was not until 1935 that Persia's name officially changed to Iran and it became the country as we know it today.[1]

After years of Great Power influences on the country, the United States and the western world began to take close interest in Iran after World War Two. At the time, Iran was

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[1] [1] The summary of Iran's history is derived from the following sources: Abrahamian, Ervand**.** (2008). *A History of Modern Iran*. Cambridge University Press**; "Iran"** (2009). In *Encyclopedia Britannica.* Retrieved May 6, 2008, from http://www.answers.com/topic/iran. **Iran.** (2009). In *Columbia Encyclopedia.* Retrieved May 6, 2008, from: http://www.answers.com/topic/iran.

ruled by Mohamed Reza Shah. However, by the 1950s, Prime Minister Mohammed
Mosaddeq held most of the country's political control. Although Mosaddeq was a
socialist, not a communist, the United States grew increasingly worried during that time
of Cold War that Iran would begin to align with the U.S.S.R. In 1953, the United States
and Britain helped organize a coup d'etat to topple Prime Minister Mosaddeq and bring
political control back into the hands of the Shah.

Until the late 1960s, Iran forged close ties with the U.S. government, and consequently
became increasingly westernized in its culture. Discontent with the status quo in the
country began to bubble, and by the 1970s, Shah Reza Pahlavi faced growing religious
opposition. The opposition was led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who was exiled
from the country years before.

Finally, in 1979, the Islamic Revolution took place in Iran. Shah Reza Pahlavi was ousted
from power and Ayatollah Khomeini became supreme leader of Iran. Iran became an
Islamic republic, governed under Sharia law. The government took a staunch, anti-
western stance. Although Iran's new constitution granted that a democratically elected
president head its government, ultimate state authority went to its Supreme Leader, which
at the time was Ayatollah Khomeini.

U.S.-Iranian relations have been tense since the country's Islamic Revolution. On Nov. 4,
1979, militants stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran, in protest that the United States had
allowed Iran's former shah into its borders for medical treatment, and refused to send him

back to Iran to withstand trial. The Iranian militants held more than 50 people hostage in the embassy for 444 days.

Another source of tension between Iran and the United States has been Iran's elusivness regarding its nuclear weapon developments. In 1995 the U.S. implemented an embargo on Iran due to nuclear weapon fears and alleged connections with terrorist activity.

In 1997, Hojatoleslam Mohammad Khatami was elected president of Iran. Khatami was a moderate and tried to pursue more liberal politics, including the restoration of relations between Iran and the West. President Khatami's reform was stunted, however, by Iran's supreme religious council, which can veto any mandate it pleases. Although Khatami was re-elected in 2001, his pushes for reform made little progress.

In 2005, Iranians elected current president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Ahmadinejad pursued a conservative line, snuffing out the hopes of any Iranians dreaming of progressive reform. Ahmadinejad imposed stricter dress codes for women and increased prosecution of minorities, such as homosexuals. Ahmadinejad is known for his blatant anti-westernism and anti-Semitism. He has forthrightly denied the existence of the Holocaust, and has vowed to pursue a "World without Zionism and America." The year after Ahmadinejad's election, Iran announced it had produced enriched uranium. The international community ordered Iran to halt plans of developing nuclear weapons. Ahmadinejad ignored these requests, and the United States imposed economic sanctions on Iran.

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Perhaps because of Iran's recessing economy, or its strict Islamic governance, support for

Ahmadinejad has been wavering in the last few years, particularly among Iran's urban

youth and educated populace.

**Iran's People and Culture[2]**

With a population around 67 million, Iran is the 19th-largest country in the world today.

Iran's population is extremely youthful. Out of its 67 million residents, approximately 60

percent are under 30 years of age. Iran's culture is dominated by Islam, the religion of 98

percent of Iranians. The other two percent of the population subscribe to either Judaism,

Christianity or Baha'i faiths. While mainstream culture ascribes to traditional Islamic

conventions, Iranian women are allowed to work outside the home, a privilege not

usually allowed in other strict, Islamic states, such as Saudi Arabia. Iran's economy is

driven by state-run ownership of oil and small private agriculture. Iran ranks third in the

world for its amount of oil reserves, and it is OPEC's second-largest provider of oil.

Though young, Iran boasts a fairly educated populace. Its literacy rate is at 77 percent,

although there is a noticeable disparity between literacy rates among women, which

averages at around 70 percent, and those of Iranian men, which rests at approximately 84

percent. Perhaps because of their education, Iranian youth are adept at social media,

particularly blogs. Given this and a government opposed to freedom of expression, blogs

provide a way for young Iranians to anonymously communicate freely. In 2005, there

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[2] Information for this section was taken from the following sources: Chiesa, Aaron, Kageyama, Toru, Sukarya, Hendy, Teme, Lisa. (2008). *Iran: A Nation of Bloggers.* Canada: Vancouver Film School. **Iran.** (2010). *The World Factbook [online].* Retrieved May 21 2010, from U.S. Central Intelligence Agency: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html.

were an estimated 700,000 blogs based in Iran, and 100,000 of them were currently active. These numbers make Iran the third-largest nation of bloggers. Despite state attempts at shutting them down, the number of Iranian bloggers continues to grow.

**The Iranian Election Protests**

On June 12, 2009, millions of Iranians lined up to vote in Iran's presidential election. The two figures facing off for president were notorious incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the more liberal Mir-Hossein Mousavi.

When the votes were tallied, it was announced that Ahmadinejad was victorious. Supporters of Mousavi cried fraud, accusing Ahmadinejad of rigging votes. The day after the election, Mousavi supporters took to the streets in (mostly) non-violent protest. Government officials cracked down by arresting protesters and pelting them with rubber, and real, bullets. Still, people came out en masse on the streets of Tehran (Iran, 2009). On June 16, 2009, Iran's Guardian Council announced that a partial recount would take place, although the original results would not be thrown out. On Friday, June 19, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khameini declared Ahmadinejad legitimately victorious (Dahl & Hefezi, 2009). The protests flared. In response, Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami announced a week later on state television that "Anybody who fights against the Islamic system or the leader of Islamic society, fight him until complete destruction." He reportedly urged the execution of leading protesters saying they were "people who wage war against God" (Fletcher, 2009).

Three months after the election, opposition leaders claimed 72 people were killed during protests (Iran opposition, 2009). Government sources claim 36 people were killed. Around 500 demonstrators, journalists, human rights and political activists were arrested throughout the protests (Borger & Tait, 2009).

**Media Censorship During Election Protests**

As protests erupted on the streets of Tehran, the Iranian government did "its utmost to choke off the flow of news from its capital" (Blair, 2009). The BBC accused Iran of "heavy electronic jamming" of its satellite used for broadcasting in Iran. Government officials also blocked Arab television network Al-Arabyia from broadcasting by shutting down its offices for a week (Radesh, 2009). Reporters Without Borders claimed Iranian secret security officials had moved into newspaper officers in Tehran, confiscating articles and censoring content. Four opposition newspapers in the country were shut down, and the government imposed press restrictions making it illegal to report first-hand on election protests (Tait & Borger, 2009).

Traditional media were not the only target of Iran's censors. Authorities smacked down on digital media as well. After the election, the Iranian government announced it was taking action against oppositional news sites that may cause public disturbances. According to OpenNet Initiative, Iran has one of the "one of the most extensive technical filtering systems in the world" (Black, 2009). The government's crackdown actually began before the elections even took place. Oppositional websites, some foreign blogs, and sites such as Facebook and Flickr were sporadically shut down in Iran during the

months preceding the election, in an attempt to block expression aimed at undermining the regime (Black, 2009).

American networks ABC and NBC were among those whose offices were raided or materials censored. European stations also reported vetting of their materials, and Al-Jazeera English reported, "We have heard that some of the newspapers have been given notices to change their editorials or their main headlines" (Ahmadinejad set, 2009).

In addition to shutting down broadcasters and jamming signals, Iranian officials maximized their censorship by revoking journalists' press accreditation, and arresting them and others the regime felt threatened by. According to Reporter Without Borders, 11 journalists were arrested during the election protests, and ten disappeared during the elections. Most likely, those missing were arrested and detained (Borger & Tait, 2009).

Iranians took to social media such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter to keep the outside world updated on the election controversy. The election protests were dubbed by some Iran's "Twitter Revolution." Media giants like CNN and BBC relied on social media for information, as did the U.S. Department of State. Twitter was so important in relaying news from Iran, the U.S. Department of State asked the Internet start-up to suspend a scheduled outage so Iranians could continue to communicate (Pleming, 2009).

Many argue that the way people in Iran and across the world used social media to relay information to one another and to the traditional news media during the Iranian election proved global communication is drastically changing. "People have now got the ability to speak to each other across continents, to join with each other in communities that are not

based simply on territory, streets, but networks; and you've got the possibility of people building alliances right across the world," said British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. "That flow of information means that foreign policy can never be the same again" (Viner, 2009).

Author Al Giordano offers some of the same sentiments in his comment regarding the events. "Ever since I penned *The Medium Is the Middleman: For a Revolution Against Media,* I've been waiting for this moment, which I predicted, twelve years ago, would come: a great day when the corporate media got pushed out of the way by authentic media from below. What is occurring worldwide, with the Iranian crisis as catalyst, is the emergence of the very kind of media from below that the human race - particularly the working class and the poor - so desperately needs" (1997).

An incident that seemed particularly influential was the death of Neda Soltan, a 26-year-old Iranian woman. Government militia killed Soltan, a student, during a protest. Soltan's death became an international icon of Iran's struggle. Her death was captured through amateur footage, and broadcast to the world through YouTube and Twitter. The morning after the incident, "Neda" had already become the fifth most commented topic on Twitter (Putz, 2009). Soltan personalized the Iranian struggle for people across the globe. "I am Neda" became an instant rallying cry for Iran's opposition. She became the subject of Facebook pages and groups, blogs and even new websites opposing Ahmadinejad's regime. One such site is NedaNet, whose mission is the "help the Iranian people by setting up networks of proxy servers, anonymizers, and any other appropriate technologies that can enable the to communicate and organize"(Welcome).

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## Case Study 2: The 2010 Chilean Earthquake

## Chile's Political History

The history of of Chile is long and complex. Its territory is believed to have been occupied for several millennia before the country was colonized by Spain, after Spanish conquistador Ferdinand Magellan laid eyes on the territory on November 1, 1520.[3]

Spain ruled Chile from afar for nearly 300 hundred years. In 1810, Chileans began to push for independence from their foreign rulers. Thus began the Chilean War of Independence, which lasted eight years. Chile officially declared independence on February 12, 1818. Spain did not recognize its independence until 1840, however, when it re-established diplomatic relations with the country.

After its independence, conflict continued to plague Chile as leaders disagreed on various styles of government and political issues. Towards the end of the 19th century, Chilean president José Manuel Balmaceda began to establish a dictatorship and violate the constitution set in place. Balmaceda was disposed of. When he refused to step down, a military conflict was launched against him, which eventually turned into the Chilean Civil War of 1891. When the war ended, Chile had been established as a Parliamentary Republic, led by president Jorge Montt.

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[3] The summary of Chile's history is found from the following sources: *Background Note: Chile.* (2009) U.S. Department of State. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/1981.htm; Kaufman, Edy (1988). *Crisis in Allende's Chile: New Perspectives*. New York, NY: Praeger Publishers; "Chile" (2009) in *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

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Chile was governed as a parliamentary republic from 1891 until 1925. During this time, the government was relatively weak and corrupt. From 1925 until 1973, Chile was ruled as a presidential republic. While reforms were made during this time, Chile's democratic government remained unstable. It went through a variety of presidents and leaders. The election of Eduardo Frei Montalva as president in 1964 seemed to lead to positive democratic reform in the country. Unfortunately, Chile's democracy was not strong enough to withstand the events that would follow.

In 1970, Senator Salvador Allende Gossens was elected president of Chile. Unrest under his rule brewed, some of it fomented by economic and political measures instituted by the United States in hopes of ridding the country of Allende's socialist reforms. In September 1973, a military coup d'etat overthrew Allende. Allende committed suicide as militants entered his palace. The military coup was led by General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte. Pinochet turned Chile's democracy into a military dictatorship. He was a brutal leader, committing an egregious amount of human rights abuses throughout his reign. During this time, Pinochet created a new constitution for Chile. He served as leader of Chile until 1988, when he was finally denied the opportunity to serve a second term as Chile's president.

In 1989, Patricio Aylwin was elected president of Chile. Aylwin's election ushered in a welcome return to democracy in the country. Alywin set up a truth and reconciliation committee in the early nineties, to investigate the countless disapearances and abuses that took place under Pinochet's reign.

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Chile's, and South America's, first female president was elected in 2006. The former

Minister of Health, President Michelle Bachelet was extremly popular with the people,

but would be criticized for her inaction during the Chilean earthquake. Bachelet's term as

president ended shortly after the Chilean earthquake. Sebastian Pinera, a Harvard-

educated businessman, was sworn into office on March 11, 2010. Pinera is the first

billionaire to be elected as Chile's president.

**Chile's People and Culture**

The country of Chile is known to be the most ethnically and culturally homogenous

nation in South and Latin America.[4] While other South American countries experience

regionalism within their bounds, Chile has been able to maintain a unified culture within

its borders. Chile has a population of approximately 17 million. Half of its citizens

identify as ethnically white, and the other half identify as mestizo, or a mix of white and

indigineous descent, while a small percent of its population is strictly indigineous in

ethnicity. Around 70 percent of Chile's 17 million people practice Catholicism, which is

by far the dominant religion in the country. Of the remaining 30 percent, around 20

percent practice other Christian religions, and around 10 claim to have no religious

affiliation.

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[4] Information from this section was derived from the following sources: **Chile.** (2010). The World Factbook [online]. Retrieved May 21 2010, from U.S. Central Intelligence Agency: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ci.html. **Country profile: Chile.** *BBC News*. 2009-12-16. Retrieved May 21, 2010 from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/country_profiles/1222764.stm.

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Currently, Chile is the most politically stable and economically prosperous country in South America. Chile's economy is characterized by high-levels of foreign trade, and the country has a reputation for solid financial institutions with sound policies backing up their credibility. Chile's top industries include agriculture, copper and other minerals, fishing and wine. Chile is the world's fifth largest exporter of wine. Chile has a solid communications infrastructure as well. Chileans are avid social media and Internet users. Approximately 5.5 million Chileans regularly use and have access to the Internet. The Internet provided an information outlet for many Chileans who were affected by the massive earthquake that rocked Chile in February, 2010.

**2010 Chilean Earthquake**

On Feb. 27, 2010, an earthquake measuring 8.8 on the Richter scale struck Chile. The earthquake, and the large tsunami triggered in its aftermath, caused an estimated 432 deaths. The earthquake occured off the coast of the Maule region of Chile, approximately 100 kilometers from the country's second-largest city, Concepcion (Magnitude, 2010). The earthquake, however, was felt throughout the country and even caused slight damage in cities as far as San Diego, Calif. (Magnitude, 2010). Tsunami warnings were issued in 54 different countries. The earthquake was so powerful, it moved the entire city of Concepcion 3.4 meters west, and experts suggest it may have shortened the length of a day on earth by 1.26 microseconds (Buis, 2010).

The earthquake devastated Chile, particularly the areas closer to its epicenter. Chilean President Michelle Bachelet declared a state of catastrophe, stating the earthquake was

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"one of the worst tragedies in the last 50 years" (Barrionuevo & Robbins, 2010). In addition to killing more than 400 people, the earthquake caused four to seven billion dollars in damages, damaged an estimated 500,000 homes, and displaced approximately 1.5 million people (Rescue efforts, 2010, Barrionuevo & Robbins, 2010).

In the days following the initial shock, chaos erupted in Chile's most-damaged cities. Looters took to the streets in Concepcion, taking not only food and other neccessary supplies from damaged stores, but electronics and other goods from homes as well. The Chilean military was dispatched to help quell the chaos in Concepcion, but citizens from smaller towns said they were left to fend for themselves. Residents of the small, coastal town of Tacahuano apparently formed neighborhood vigilante groups to protect their property. "Without military authority in the village," said one resident, "something must be done to protect people from all of this" (Grant, 2010).

While President Bachelet declared a state of catastrophe, she initially stated that Chile was not in need of international aid. A few days after the quake, however, Bachelet opened the country up to foreign assistance. Bachelet has been criticized for not welcoming aid immediately, and controversy surrounds the government's response to the disaster. Some state that the government did not correctly assess the gravity of the earthquake's damage, thus declining financial assistance and delaying aid to areas in need. A poll in a prominent Chilean newspaper showed that 60 percent of Chileans thought the government's response was "slow and inefficient" (Benson & Gardner, 2010). The government falsely estimated the death by hundreds on numerous occasions, and

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perhaps worse yet, Chile's catastrophe-alert system failed to alert citizens of the impending disaster.

The earthquake also caused serious damage to Chile's communications infrastructure. Many were left without Internet and telephone access. The country's landline service was particularly damaged. Immediately following the earthquake, Santiago and other cities near the earthquake's epicenter experienced a blackout, in which most electric communication services were unavailable. During this time, 3G Internet was the only available way to communicate, so Chileans took to their mobile phones to relay and find information. Twitter became a particularly important source of information, and for most trapped in darkness with no landline, Internet or television, the only source of information (Choney, 2010).

**Social Media & the Chilean Earthquake**

In the aftermath of Chile's earthquake, Chile became the buzz on a variety of social media sites. It helped that Chileans are avid social media users. Chile boasts fifth in the world when it comes to the amount of Facebook users in the country, and its population is only 16.7 million (Nosowitz, 2010).

Needless to say, Facebook groups, pages and causes surrounding the disaster popped up almost immediately. Some were established to raise support, some to generate awareness. The page "Chile Earthquake" has more than 10,000 members and contains an abundance of information regarding the crisis. Facebook's Global Disaster Relief page was a go-to

site for many information-seekers, and relayed ways in which users could donate to the earthquake's relief efforts.

On Twitter, users posted photos and real-time updates of the event. Less than an hour after the earthquake struck, Chile became the number one, most-talked about topic on the social networking site. That morning, more than 2,000 tweets per minute came from Twitter as tweeting Chileans updated the world with news from their country (Seibt, 2010). Traditional news organziations such as CBS and CNN set up web pages specifically designed to update readers on tweets coming out of Chile. Elliott Yamin, an American Idol contestant, gained a particularly solid following in the quake's aftermath, as he was in Chile when it struck and regularly tweeted updates from Santiago.

In addition to raising awareness and financial relief, social media also played a role in helping people find and contact loved ones caught in the disaster zone. Google launched a version of its Person Finder application specifically for Chile, and Twitter was used to track down missing people as well. One woman describes her experience using Twitter to find her sister-in-law in Santiago: "...my sister-in-law was in Santiago and we couldn't find her. No text, no phones, nothing. We were able to make contact with locals using twitter search...One of the locals looked for, and FOUND my brothers wife, two hours after first contact. I am so thankful for social media" (Silverman, 2010).

**Method**

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I used qualitative case study research as a method for this study. A qualitative case study method "facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources" (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Case study is non-interventative and empathetic. I did not disturb the ordinary activity of the cases, by discreetly examining and observing online communication. I sought to understand how Facebook users saw their role as members or creators of Facebook groups in order to address the larger question posed in this thesis, namely what role social media play in generating support for, and raising awareness of, political and natural crises. In doing this I aimed to preserve multiple realities, which were the multiple points of views and expressions stated within Facebook groups (Stake, 1995). In my research I examined data sources within the context of Facebook groups. Facebook groups consist of information provided by multiple users with different intents and purposes.

I chose to study 10 Facebook groups with topics focusing on the Chilean earthquake, and 10 Facebook groups focused on the Iranian election protests. There were hundreds of groups focusing on both the Chilean earthquake, and the Iranian election protests. However, I chose to study groups based in the disaster zones. When assembling Facebook groups, creators have the choice to state the location in which they are based. The location is then stated in the group's description. I examined groups with stated locations of either Iran or Chile. Due to language constraints, I could only examine groups that communicated mainly in English. There were around 50 groups based in Iran I could choose from, and I randomly selected from within these options. I could not find 10 groups with Chile as their stated location, so I decided to include groups whose

administrators (aka, creators), had a stated network of somewhere in Chile. These groups

had no stated locations, that is the administrators chose not to state where they were when

creating the group. When users join Facebook, however, they have the opportunity to

pick a network based on their location or other affiliations. For example, as a resident of

Minneapolis, my Facebook network is Minneapolis. I assumed that if a creator's network

was Chile or a Chilean university, they were based in Chile, and thus the group was

created in Chile as well. I chose these groups due to my interest in determining how

individuals in the geographical midst of the crisis utilized social media.

As mentioned, I only chose groups that were primarily English-language. Some groups

studied had a limited amount of information written in a foreign language, mainly

Spanish or Farsi. I was able to somewhat study this information using Google's

translating technology. The fact that I looked only at English-language groups could

make a difference because members and creators could be, presumably, more educated or

more oriented toward global communication than members and creators of groups

communicating in local languages.

Each group chosen was a public group. Public groups do not require other Facebook

users to join the group to view all group activity and information. Consequently, I did not

have to become a group member to observe it. I only chose groups that had more than 25

members, and most had more than 50 members. The groups examined were in existence

during March and April of 2010. For groups related to the Chilean earthquake, this time

was contemporary as the earthquake took place on February 27, 2010, so most groups

would still be in existence and active during the research period. The Iranian elections

took place in June 2009. Some of the groups created surrounding the elections could have been erased by March and April of 2010. However, there were still plenty of groups still in existence, and all information and activity dating back to the June elections was still accessible. Many of the groups were even still active. When studied in March 2010, many groups still had members still posting, although most of the information dated from the beginning of the political unrest in summer 2009. Thankfully with Facebook, information from all times is accessible until someone intentionally takes it down. Consequently, the timing of this study should not make too much of a difference in the results.

I found the groups I chose by using Facebook's search tool. This tool can search for Facebook groups only. I entered the terms, "Chile earthquake," "help Chile," "Iran election," or "Iran," and was able to find all the groups necessary for this study.

Given the overarching research interest in examining how social media contribute to collective intelligence and the public sphere during times of crises, when analyzing these groups I sought to answer three specific research questions:

**1) What is the purpose of each group?**

To determine this, I examined what was written by the creator under the group's "description" section. I also examined what was written under the "news" section. In this section, the creators often stated the group's purpose. For example, the description section of the group "Free election in Iran," states, "We want free and fair elections for a National Legislative and Constituent Assembly and to transfer power to the representatives of the

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people of Iran." I also looked at any wall posts the creator may have written that give further information on the group's purpose. The wall is a section of the group that enables members to post statements or information. Through the wall, individuals can interact with each other. The wall provides a space where members can post links to videos, photos, other websites, etc. There is also a discussion section of the group. This is less commonly used than the wall, which is the most popular part of the group. The discussion section enables members to take part in longer discussions and post longer pieces of news and information. Wall posts are usually short. Most are no longer than one to two sentences.

After examining all the groups, I came up with various codes for the different purposes— while this is not a quantitative study that employs coding methodologies, such categorization of findings facilitates discussion. For example, if a group stated it wanted the government of Iran to hold new elections, or that it wanted the United States not to recognize Ahmadinejad's victory, I categorized this as "pressure on the Iranian government." I found this an appropriate code as the groups demanded action from the government directly, or asked other nations to pressure the government into taking certain actions. Other codes used include: Raise Awareness, Pressure on the Iranian Government, Honor Neda, and Provide Independent Information

**2) How are members of the group seeking to accomplish this purpose?**

This question took much more examination to answer than the previous one. To answer this question, I studied most aspects of the group: wall posts, description, discussions. I

looked for anything that gave a specific suggestion of actions or steps that could be taken to further serve the interest of the group and its members.

In the group, "Democracy for Iran...We Support Iranians," for example, the creator posted one method of accomplishing its purpose in the description section. "Please show your support for the Iranian protesters by joining Democracy for IRAN.... PLZ spread the word .... we are aiming for 1 MILLION SUPPORT on FACEBOOK."[5] On the same group's wall, a member wrote, "FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY IN IRAN - ORDER YOUR AZADI WRISTBANDS AND STAY INFORMED ABOUT IRAN HERE: www.freedominiran.com." I counted this as a suggestion of something members could do to further the group's purpose; they could purchase a wristband as a sign of support and solidarity for democracy in Iran. I came up with codes for the various suggestions. I coded this suggestion as an "Act of Solidarity." Other codes included: Event Alerts, Petitions, Civic/Consumer Engagement, Sharing Information, Calls to Spread the Word, Getting Around Firewalls/Censorship and Miscellaneous.

**3) How did the groups position themselves in relation to traditional media?**

To examine this question, I scanned groups' walls and descriptions for any mention of traditional media sources, which include major newspapers, television networks, etc. I also looked to see if information being posted seemed to come directly from the member, in other words, from a non-mediated source, or from a traditional media source. I

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[5] In efforts of accuracy, I took quotes directly from Facebook group members. Some of these quotes included misspellings. I decided not to change any misspellings in order to preserve original data.

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examined all posted material within a group for any clue as to how that group saw its role in disseminating information, in relation to traditional media.

For example, on the walls of groups from both Chile and Iran, members frequently posted links to related news stories or pictures from traditional, western and non-western news sources. By noticing this, I could conclude that the members still depended on traditional sources for information.

I also looked for statements such as the following from the group "Freedom for Iran." News sites are not being able to tell the whole story, the group claimed, "so we are going to show you the real and brutal face of this unbelievable protest." Statements like this demonstrated the group positioned itself as being independent of traditional news sources when it comes to gathering information, as traditional news sources cannot be trusted, because they do not have accurate, contextual information to broadcast, or they are not allowed to broadcast this information. When possible, I created codes for this information as well. Codes for positioning of groups related to the Iranian protests include: Source for Traditional Media, Source for Accurate Information, and Source for Direct Information.

For more details on the data collected within each group, see the appendix section of this thesis.

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**Chapter 4: Findings**

**Case Study 1 - The Iranian Election Protests**

**What is the purpose of each group?**

The general purpose of all the groups from Iran was to protest the Iranian elections and/or to support those protesting the elections in Iran. They all stated they wanted freedom and justice for the Iranian people. The specifics of how they aimed to achieve that varied a bit. I have placed these specifics into the categories below. Some groups stated purposes that fell into more than one of these categories.

- **Raise Awareness:** Some desired to raise awareness of the disputed elections in Iran. One group stated it aimed to gain one million members in efforts to raise awareness. Other groups stated they aimed to support Iranian protesters by providing ways in which individuals could bypass Iran's government censors on the web, thus enabling the outside world to know what was going on within the censored bounds of Iran. Most groups had the aim, in some shape or form, to support protesters by raising awareness of their plight around the world.

- **Pressure on the Iranian Government:** Around three groups aimed to support protesters by demanding that the elections not be recognized by the international community, or that Iran hold new, fair elections. One group stated its purpose was to support the protests by encouraging the European Union's and United States' governments not to recognize Ahmadinejad's victory. This group was entitled, "Where is my vote? Don't recognize and don't invite Ahmadinejad!" It also stated

in its purpose that it intended to pressure the Italian government not to invite
Ahmadinejad to the G8 Summit in Italy, which took place in July 2009.

Two other groups sought to pressure Iran's government directly. "Democracy for
IRAN..We Support Iranians," sought to pressure the Iranian government by
making specific demands. It stated, "WE THE IRANIAN VOTERS WANT OUR
VOICE TO BE HEARD LOUD AND CLEAR AND DEMAND: 1. A new
election. 2. Remove the communication/information blockage. Lift limitations
implemented since 12 June 2009 on SMS, international phone lines, filtered
websites, blogs, social networks such as Facebook, YouTube, and more. 3. End
the violence, attacks on the streets, student dormitories and residential buildings,
and release the political activists and students who have been detained since 12
June 2009. 4. Allow the reformist candidates (Mousavi and Karroubi) to speak to
the public freely and directly."

The third group, "Freedom in Iran," stated it wanted, "free and fair elections for a
National Legislative and Constituent Assembly and to transfer power to the
representatives of the people of Iran."

- **Honor Neda:** Several of the groups sought to support protesters in Iran by
  honoring Neda Agha Soltan, the woman whose death by the hands of a
  government militant was broadcast throughout the world on YouTube. These
  groups used Neda as a sign of the injustice imparted by the current Iranian
  regime, and a rallying cry of support for the opposition. Members of one group,

called "Never Forget Neda Agha Soltan," stated they were dedicated to those who "sacrificed their lives for freedom," and also called on members to brainstorm "ideas to help weaken the grip of the Islamic Republic of Iran through memorials and other ways." Four of the ten groups were dedicated specifically to Neda. The groups often honored other people, in general, who died for freedom and justice in Iran as well.

- **Provide Independent Information:** Of the ten groups, only three stated, in some way, that their purpose was to distribute information apart from traditional media sources. This was always in addition to the group's purpose of supporting the opposition's protesters in Iran. The group stating this purpose most outwardly was entitled "Neda." In its description, it claimed that "you get the most updated independent news here," regarding the election protests in Tehran. The group "Freedom for Iran," claimed in its description that "we are going to show you the real and brutal face of this unbelievable protest," essentially implying that it would provide information and images not relayed in traditional media. The third group was more subtle in its stated purpose of sharing first-hand accounts of the protests. It simply asked its members to share any information, links or thoughts regarding the election protests in Tehran.

**How were the groups accomplishing their purposes?**

Though the group creator(s), or administrators, originally stated the group's purpose in its description, it was group members who ended up dictating how this purpose should be

accomplished. Often group members, rather than creators, came up with tactics and suggestions and posted them on the group's wall. Ideas on how to achieve a group's aims were largely generated through member discussions and wall posts. Members often seemed to ignore a group creator's specific aims and come up with their own ways to accomplish a purpose.

I placed the variety of ways in which groups sought to achieve their purposes into several categories. Most groups utilized all the categories in some way, although some had more options than others. These categories include:

- **Sharing Information:** All groups served their purpose by sharing information in some shape or form. There were many links to other Facebook groups, social media sites like YouTube or Twitter, related websites, multiple blogs, traditional news sites such as CNN or BBC, and/or even Persian-language news sites. The links shared relevant information with group members. YouTube was a particularly popular site to link to; many members in all groups linked to the video of Neda's death or videos of the protests taking place in Tehran. At times, members would comment on the information shared, and keep updating their posts as new information came to light. Sharing information seemed the most widely used method by members seeking to participate in, and further groups' purposes.

- **Calls to spread the word:** Each of the ten groups had administrators or members who posted on the wall, or in the group's description, to "spread the word," in

some form or another. Group members encouraged other group members to invite others, and get the word out. The exact ways in which they did this varied. In the group, "Protest to Iran Election," a member requested that everyone post in English only, so that the word could get out to the international community. In, "We NEDA Revolution," a member posted, "I suggest that you invite all your friends and families to join this group but most importantly spread this information around."

- **Petitions:** In the vast majority of groups created to support Iranian election protesters, members presented and requested signatures for at least one petition. Some groups had a few different petitions presented on their walls or discussion boards. Usually, the petition would be presented via a link to another website, in which members could click on, fill out their information, and it would be added the petition. Unfortunately, there is no way to tell whether or not these petitions were sent, unless each author was tracked down and asked specifically. Most took place on third-party websites that enabled users to create and send their own petitions. Thus, it was up to the creators to send petitions. Examples of petitions include one addressed to the International Court of Justice, calling the court to investigate crimes committed by Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, one urging European leaders to make it illegal to buy or sell gas from a country, such as Iran, that violates human rights, and another asking the U.K. government to shut down the London location of Iran's state-sponsored, English-language television station, Press TV.

- **Event Alerts:** Event alerts were also an extremely popular way in which group members sought to accomplish the purpose of groups. All groups had at least one event listed on their walls. Most groups had several different event alerts, listed by several different members. Most of the events were protests, rallies or vigils. Members sought to invite people to attend by posting event information on the groups' walls. Events taking place across the world were listed by members from all different parts of the globe. Members posted information about a student rally taking place in Tehran, a candlelight vigil for Neda in Washington, D.C., a global moment of silence for Neda, a demonstration taking place against the elections in Los Angeles, and many others. These Facebook groups provided a forum where anyone could post events and relay them to a relatively wide, and relevant audience.

Specific examples include the following requests:

- o "I'm trying to get a vigil together in St. Louis, please if anyone is close by, contact me, email tmh1980@sbcglobal.net, or here on Facebook" "1 minue silence in honor of NEDA place: all over the world, date: 27 June 2009, Time: 19:15 ( Tehran time)" (From the group "Neda.")

- o "I just recveived this info: TO ALL IRANIAN FRIENDS AND DEMONSTRATORS IN IRAN. PLEASE SPREAD THE WORD TO EVERYONE TO HOLD THE QURAN IN THEIR HANDS WHILE IN THE STREETS TOMORROW! BY ISLAMIC LAWS IT IS A MAJOR

SIN TO KILL ANYONE WITH A QURAN IN THEIR HANDS, AND

PLEASE WALK PEACEFULLY AND SILENTLY... GOD BLESS YOU

ALL FOR ...YOUR COURAGE. join Mousavi, Khatami and Karoubi at

4pm ghelab Sq. to Azadi Sq. in Tehran." (From the group "Democracy for

IRAN..We Support Iranians.")

All the events listed were directly related to supporting Iranian protesters, opposing Iran's alleged election results, or honoring Neda's death.

- **Acts of Solidarity:** Six groups had members mention specific acts of solidarity as a way to support protesters or protest the election in Iran themselves. Members would request others to change their profile picture to a specific symbol to support Iranian protesters. They asked members to purchase and wear green bracelets, identifying them as supporters of Iran's opposition. A group member from Atlanta, Georgia, urged fellow group members to pass on the word that "we are using green ribbons with Neda's name in our wrist and cars. Lets show everyone that we will not stand for this violence in Iran. Free Iran now!!!"

Solidarity from group members was also expressed simply by members stating their support from their geographical location. For example, "support from Switzerland," or "support from South Korea!"

- **Civic/Consumer Engagement:** Half of the groups had members who used civic or consumer engagement in seeking to accomplish the group's purpose. Members called on supporters to contact various world leaders, such as President Obama or

the UN Secretary General, and urge them to speak up and support Iranian protesters. A member in the group "Freedom for Iran," wrote, "EVERYBODY WRITE A LETTER TO ASK MR FRATTINI [Italy's foreign minister] WHAT ITALY IS DOING TO HELP IRAN PROTEST!" In the group "Neda," a member posted, "send this email to the Iranian embasssy in your country. Below are a few adresses. Use the net to find the specific adress to the embassy in your country."

In addition to civic engagement, group members utilized consumer engagement to support Iran protesters as well. A cry found in multiple groups was to boycott Nokia-Siemens, one of the largest telecommunications hardware, software and services companies in the world, for selling monitoring equipment to Iran. A group member in **"Democracy for IRAN..We Support Iranians,"** told other members to urge Facebook to stop closing Iran accounts. In the same group, a member asked others to contact Google, Inc., stating, "Please Join in requesting One Day Google Green Page for Iran."

- **Getting Around Firewalls/Censorship:** As explained, the Iranian government tried to crack down on protesters by setting up firewalls and censoring traditional and non-traditional media. In seven of the ten groups, members sought to support protesters and continue to raise awareness of the plight in Iran by sharing ways in which Iranians could overcome censorship and firewalls -- mainly on the Internet. Members shared several sites on how to set up proxy servers and other safe ways to relay information over the web. For example, in the group "Neda," a member posted, "PLEASE READ: the Iranian Government is now tracking Twitter and

Facebook in Iran. Everyone please go to your setting and please change the location and network to IRAN so the government will have a hard time tracking the Facebookers and tweeters...this will prevent them from shutting down twitter and Facebook....This ...is one of our few sources of media in Iran...Please pass this on.....Thank you." Turning thousands of Facebook networks to "Iran" could prevent authorities from being able to tell who is and who is not actually in Iran. Consequently, as they are unable to shut down all accounts, they may miss people who are actually in Iran, or get overwhelmed with the multitudes. In the group "Never Forget Neda Agha Soltan," a member asked everyone to change their Facebook network to Iran, to confuse any authorities trying to shut down Iranian profiles. It was also suggested that all group members change their last names to "Iran" as well, for the same purpose. A member of "Democracy for IRAN..We Support Iranians," urged members to quickly send any videos they had to CNN, so that the world could see them before they could be confiscated by Iran's government censors.

- **Miscellaneous**: The above categories were the most frequently used methods by group members and administrators to further the purpose of their groups. However, there were a few other methods that popped up in one or two groups. A member of "Freedom for Iran" gave those protesting in Iran advice on how to defend themselves when attacked by government militia. The administrator of "Never Forget Neda Agha Soltan" encouraged members to brainstorm ways in which they could support protesters and further the opposition movement in Iran.

In a few groups, members helped translate information from news sites, blogs, or other media from Farsi to English, in order for English speakers to understand more fully what was going on. Members helped translate information into languages other than, and from, English as well.

Additionally, although it was not the norm, a few groups urged members to send videos, information, etc..., to traditional news sources so that awareness of what was happeneing in Tehran could be raised. Some members also used these Facebook groups to get information on what was happening directly from members living in Tehran. This method, and more about the groups' positioning compared to traditional media, will be discussed under the following question.

**How did the groups position themselves in relation to traditional media?**

The majority of the groups did not specifically mention any intents to compare themselves with traditional media, suggesting that a main preoccupation of academics and journalists might not in fact be of great interest to social media users.

All ten groups, however, had links to some traditional media site posted either on their wall, news or description section. In this way, all groups and their members used traditional media to share information and update each other on the latest affairs. They relied on traditional media, in some way, for information. There were many links to traditional western sources, such as BBC and CNN, as well as links to Farsi-language, Iranian sites.

The groups also posted plenty of links to non-traditional media sources such as blogs and independent websites. Members would state, "go here for more information," demonstrating a reliance on and trust toward sites outside of traditional media. In all of the groups, members offered links to non-traditional media sources, in addition to traditional ones.

While most of the groups only mentioned traditional media through indirectly posting links to it, there were a few groups that suggested more strongly, through wall posts and in description and news sections, an intended positioning compared to traditional media.

These groups seemed to position themselves in one or more of three ways: As a source for traditional media to get information from, a source for the most accurate news from Tehran, and as a source for the most updated news from Tehran.

- **Source for Traditional Media:** Groups that viewed themselves as an information source for traditional media urged members to send any news or videos they had on the Iranian protests to traditional news organizations. "Spread the news, video, links...contact your leaders, media..." wrote the administrator of "Democracy for IRAN..We Support Iranians." A member from "We NEDA Revolution," told members to "Let the news agencies know that if they get less and less info from Iran, it's because the IRI is censoring the internet and phone calls." The description for "Neda," read, "Please Members Inform Media & Newspaper That We Want Our Voice To Be Heard After all We Are The Largest Facebook Group for Neda."

CNN seemed to be an especially popular news site among the groups that focused more on media, perhaps because of its iReport section, which enables individuals to send in videos or photos they have personally taken. CNN's iReport was mentioned several times in some of the groups. "Please send videos to CNN and ask them to translate and play them, let them play these epic news," a member of "Protest to the Iran Election" wrote. A member of another group urged fellow members to send any video coverage of the protests they had to CNN immediately, before Iranian officials got hold of it.

- **Source for Accurate Information**: Two of the ten groups seemed particularly focused on getting out information. The group "Freedom for Iran" stated in its description that it intended to show members what was really going on in Tehran. "Tv news programs are not able and/or allowed to show you unconfirmed or too brutal footage of this protest," the administrator stated in the group's description. "Western politicians need to act diplomatic and are not able and/or allowed to tell the truth about what they really think about the regime in Iran. So we are going to show you the real and brutal face of this unbelievable protest."

The administrator of this group urged members to check out the posted photos and videos, to see what supposedly could not be shown on TV. He/she also linked to the group's blog and Twitter account, where more information was provided. Interestingly enough, however, the group also had several links to western, traditional news sources, in their section designated for information.

Members of the group "Protest to Iran election" seemed especially bent on getting information directly from Iran. One member stated, "When I was studying in Glasgow, I had an impossible time trying to explain the real Iran to my British mates. But now you are experiencing it first hand and you all support us. Everyone is active trying to get the real information out and know the truth. This is just too beautiful!"

- **Source for Direct Information**: From its wall posts and description section, "Protest to Iran election" also made clear it intended to bring its members direct, and the most updated information. Its description section stated, "For latest videos and protest info, see discussion board + wall." The wall was full of direct, real-time updates from Iran. Most of these updates look as if they were also posted on Twitter, due to the hashtag following them. It is impossible to tell whether the members of the group originally posted these thoughts or not. However, they still seem to be meant as real-time updates for the group's members. An example of one such update states, "People holding lit candles in Hafte Tir Sq. have been attacked by anti-riot police #iranelection." Individuals from other countries were asking group members in Iran questions such as, "It's 1:30 pm in Tehran, can anyone tell me what is going on?" Questions such as this were rarely answered directly, however -- at least, not via the group's wall.

The group "Neda" was very forthright in its intentions to provide members with the most updated news and information. "You Get The Most Updated Independent News Here," it stated in its description. On its wall, group members

did provide links to many sources of independent information, such as blogs, YouTube videos, etc. Whether or not this was actually the most updated (or even accurate) information available is hard to tell. Links to traditional media sources were posted by members several times as well. Yet, untraditional media links seemed far more popular in this group.

**Summary**

In examining ten Facebook groups focusing on the Iranian elections, it seems that all groups state they exist to promote freedom and justice for the Iranian people. Several groups chose to promote justice and freedom by honoring Neda Soltan, the 26-year-old woman killed at a protest. Other groups stated they aimed to promote freedom and justice by pressuring the Iranian government to hold new elections, or by raising awareness of the events taking place in Tehran. Few stated their aim was to provide independent information.

The groups accomplished their purposes in several ways. These ways included asking other members to spread the word of a particular group, asking members to sign petitions, providing information on the protests, inviting people to partake in events and protests or to stand in solidarity by posting a certain message or wearing a certain article of clothing. Additionally, group members asked others to get involved civically by contacting government leaders, or corporately by boycotting certain companies. A popular tactic used to accomplish groups' purposes was to provide information as to how Iranians could

get around firewalls imposed by Iran's authorities. In one group, members actually

offered advice on how to physically protect oneself from militia at protests in Tehran.

When it came to positioning themselves next to traditional media, most groups were not

direct in their intents to do this. Most groups used traditional media to spread

information. A few groups, however, did outwardly state intents to position themselves

against traditional media. In doing this, these groups stated they should be used as an

information source for traditional media, a place to get information more accurate than

traditional media, or a place to get information more directly than could be obtained

through traditional media.

As  could be presumed due to the varying nature of the crisis, studying groups focused on

the Chilean earthquake resulted in findings quite different from those of the Iranian

election protests case study.

**Case Study 2 - The 2010 Chilean Earthquake**

**What is the purpose of each group?**

All ten groups created for the cause of the 2010 Chilean earthquake existed for the

primary purpose of helping and supporting Chile and its people in wake of the quake's

damage. The specific purposes are categorized below:

- **Support/Help Financially or Physically:** The majority of groups simply stated

  that its primary goal was to help Chile after the earthquake. For example, the

  group, **"HOW TO HELP CHILE / CÓMO AYUDAR A CHILE,"** simply stated it

aimed to, "Provide ways to help Chile in the aftermath of its quake." However, many of these groups followed up that description with very specific ways to donate time, materials and/or money. This demonstrates an aim of supporting financially or physically those impacted by the earthquake. These ways will be elaborated upon in the section describing how groups are accomplishing their purposes.

- **Raise Awareness:** Three groups mentioned that their purpose was to spread information, in efforts to raise awareness about how people could help Chile after the earthquake. The group, "US HELPS CHILE AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE AND TSUNAMI," stated in its description that it was "created to inform people about the earthquake and create awareness." Similarly, **"LEVANTEMOS CHILE ¡¡¡ HELP TO CHILE,"** claimed its purpose was to "provide information needed to help after the Chilean earthquake."

- **Emotional Support:** The group "2/27/2010 Chile's Earthquake Survivors --- Sobrevivientes Terremoto Chile" stated a purpose more unique than the other groups studied. It claimed its purpose was to provide a space for those impacted by the earthquake to support one another. Its description stated: "All those people, all of us, who are living in critical moments and saving in our memories a lot of scenes, experiences and emotions such as helplessness, grief, anger and loneliness but, we also must have hope, strength, passion and fight for ours and those around us. It's a reconstruction time. Use this space as you wish."

**How were the groups accomplishing their purposes?**

The ways in which the groups sought to accomplish their purposes fell mainly into one of the categories below:

- **Ways to donate money:** This was by far the largest method group members and administrators used to further the purpose of their groups -- which was to support or help Chile and its people. Every group, without exception, listed ways in which group members or others could donate financially to Chile's cause. Group members posted links of different organizations' websites where people could donate. Most of the links to organizations looked legitimate, and had proper security (https instead of http) measures built into their url addresses. They listed bank account numbers that were accepting donations, and numbers people could text to automatically donate through their phones. Also listed were links to different Facebook groups that would supposedly donate money for every member who joined.

  Something particularly interesting about how the groups sought to support Chile through the generation of finances, is how they enabled individuals to give specific information about ways to donate in different countries. For instances, a member would post something like, "to donate in Australia, you can send money to this bank account..." Or, "How can we send money from Brazil??" Several of the groups had donation suggestions like this. These groups had no geographical bounds when it came to enabling and informing people how to donate money to those impacted by Chile's earthquake.

- **Information sharing:** The majority of groups tried to serve their purpose by raising awareness of the situation in Chile, by sharing news and other information. Many members posted links to western news sources, or links to YouTube videos of the earthquake's damage, or informational videos explaining the technical aspects of an earthquake. "What is an 8.8 Richter? Watch and Learn," a member said on a post that included an informational YouTube video. There was even a video taken by an individual while the actual earthquake was taking place. It seemed as though this video was shown originally on a Chilean news station. Members also posted several pictures of the earthquake's damage.

  Several groups also shared information specifically aimed to help people in the earthquake zone, or about how to reach people in the earthquake zone. "Free Verizon calls to Chile," stated a member in "Catastrophe in Chile, would you like to help?" Another group provided a map of roadblocks set up in Chile after the earthquake, to help any individiuals who may be traveling in the country at the time, and yet another listed where people in Chile could find open wi-fi networks.

- **People finding:** Four of the ten groups supported their goals by helping find missing friends and family in Chile. Members would post pictures or names and information about individuals and ask if anyone has seen or heard of these people. "Please, nesecito information for survivors in Concepcion, Chile," wrote a member of "Chile Needs your help." "Their names are Luisa Rodriguez and Thomas Mcevoy thank you."A member of "LEVANTEMOS CHILE ¡¡¡ HELP TO CHILE," posted on the wall, "URGENT, IVAN DE LARA IS ONLY 8

YEARS old and was seen alone in Constitucion. He is disabled. Looking for relatives in Chile. Please copy and paste this...it costs you nothing!" Members would copy and paste pleas like this so that they could reach a wider audience. It is hard to tell if posts asking help in finding individuals were effective. Rarely did members respond to requests such as these on walls of groups. However, they could have emailed the members looking privately. Additionally, groups would provide links to Google's Chile people finder, an application Google launched specifically to help people connect and find people in Chile after the earthquake (http://chilepersonfinder.appspot.com/).

- **Ways to donate physically (Volunteerings, in-kind donations, etc...):** A few groups gave very detailed information regarding how people in Chile could volunteer, specific items that were needed, and where individuals could drop those items off. For example, the description section of "How to Help Chile (earthquake)," stated, "HOME OF CHRIST BEGINS COLLECTION OF AID ONEMI: Starting tomorrow Monday, 1 at 12:00 hrs., Receiving blankets, diapers, powdered milk and canned goods to help earthquake victims. Collection points: all the sites of the Home of Christ throughout the country, and Santiago Colegio San Ignacio El Bosque (Pocuro 2801, Providence) and the Home of Christ located in General Velásquez." This group included many other places where individuals could donate specific items and even blood. It also listed organizations in Chile in need of volunteers. "A ROOF ● ● ● ● ● ● FOR CHILE: ATTENTION VOLUNTEERS WEDNESDAY MORNING MARCH 3 We meet at OVALLE

COLEGIO SAN IGNACIO ALONSO 10:00 AM." A Roof for Chile is a charitable organization based in Chile.

- **Event information:** This is somewhat related to giving people ways to donate, as most events were fundraisers of some sort. Members of a few groups posted detailed event information, inviting people to take part. "OPEN MEETING IN SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGN TO ORGANIZE ATACAMA," wrote a member of "Chile needs your help," with date and time included. A member from Japan wrote on the wall of "HOW TO HELP CHILE/COMO AYUDAR A CHILE," "Residents in Japan can Help Chile. Official Fundraising, Saturday March 6th."

- **Miscellaneous:** A couple of groups had members that promoted acts of solidarity. Calls for these acts were minimal, however. They included members posting statements like, "If you're Chilean, and those with compatriots affected, change your profile picture to a Chilean flag." This statement was made on the wall of "Chile Needs your help."

**How did the groups position themselves in relation to traditional media?**

None of the ten groups examined made an outright reference as to their position compared to traditional media. The groups did not try to take the place of traditional media, or provide news that could not be found in traditional media. In fact, the majority of groups linked to traditional media sources - western and South American - to inform and update group members on news and events related to Chile's earthquake. The groups also linked to several nontraditional media sites as well, however.

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Although it did not specifically state this in its purpose, there was one group that seemed to have members providing first-hand accounts of events happening in Chile. "I can tell you that, in addition to the earthquake and tsunami, people are being affected by vandalism. There has been some looting in some cities affected from desperate people and also from some vandals that want to take the chance. It looks like a war zone," wrote a member of "Catastrophe in Chile, would you like to help?" This group also used traditional media sources to spread information, however. Providing direct information was not the norm -- in this group or any of the others.

After studying these ten groups designed to raise awareness of the Chilean earthquake and generate support for those affected by it, it seems that most members continued to rely on traditional media for news of the earthquake. The groups functioned as a place where individuals could go to discuss the news, share information, and support the cause. They were an online community where news could be more than passively consumed, but rather interacted with and acted upon.

**Summary**

All of the ten groups examined that focused on Chile's earthquake had a similar purpose-- to provide help and support for people impacted by the disaster. Specifically, the groups aimed to help financially or materially, raise awareness of the earthquake's damage, or provide emotional support to those in need.

The groups sought to accomplish their purposes using several different methods. Providing ways to donate money was the most popular method used among the groups.

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Other methods included sharing information, help finding missing people, ways to donate materially, or volunteer opportunities, information on fundraising or vigil events, and even some acts of solidarity.

The groups created to support Chileans after the earthquake made no specific comparison to traditional media. The groups did, however, rely on traditional media for information. Some groups became a hub of information from multiple media sources, enabling members to get a variety of news and updates in one place. While some group members gave what seemed like first-hand updates of events in Chile, most simply posted information from traditional sources. Consequently, it seems as if the groups studied primarily relied on traditional media for information, yet provided a forum where members could interact with this information.

In response to both a natural and a political crisis, then, it seems that Facebook group users did not position themselves principally as alternative sources of information, but rather as aggregators of information that other users could share, discuss and possibly act upon in the real world. What this means for the role of social media in crises is discussed in the next chapter.

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**Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

The Iranian election protests and the 2010 Chilean earthquake are very different types of crises. One is political, and the other is natural. Despite the differences in their nature, in general social media users created Facebook groups around each crisis for similar reasons, to generate support for people in times of crisis. Overall, I have found that Facebook groups functioned as an alternative, global, public sphere--a place where information relayed by traditional media could be interacted with, and discussed by members. Members could use this forum as a place to create meaning out of the information they receive from traditional outlets. They could also use Facebook groups as a forum for challenging ruling authorities, for example, when members discussed ways in which Iranians could overcome firewalls. Social media, I found, is not a space that replaces traditional media, as some literature as suggested, but a place that enhances the experience and information relayed by traditional media by encouraging people to be more than passive consumers of it.

The ways that groups dedicated to the Iranian political crisis used to further their mission to support Iranian protesters, contest the election results and promote freedom and justice in Iran, differed slightly from the ways used by members of groups focused on helping those affected by Chile's earthquake. Overall, it seemed as if groups focused on Iran were more dedicated to raising awareness and generating the flow of information regarding the protests, whether through arranging protests or overcoming Internet firewalls. Groups focused on Chile's disaster, however, were primarily dedicated to raising financial support for earthquake victims.

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These findings make sense, given the notion that the Iranian protests took place in part because Iranians wanted their voices to be heard. Iranian authorities did their best to shut down and censor any media - traditional or nontraditional - voicing dissent to the election results. Iran kicked foreign journalists out of the country, set up Internet firewalls, and prevented newspapers in the country from publishing anything supporting the opposition. It seems only natural that Facebook groups dedicated to this political crisis would primarily reflect the desire to be heard, and to have the opportunity to freely express themselves. I believe these findings demonstrate that social media could play key role in enabling citizens living under oppressive regimes to avoid censorship and participate in freedom of expression, not inherently in that they make information easily and widely available, but also quite literally in providing advice on ways to evade censors or militias.

In Iran, social media, such as blogs, are among the only ways young people can freely express themselves. Social media allow people to post anonymously if necessary, avoiding persecution from ruling authorities. Additionally, social media enable individuals living in oppressive regimes to share with the world information that otherwise would be censored by authorities. I believe sites such as YouTube provide a forum where videos, like the one of Neda Soltan's death, can be broadcast throughout the world and accessed with just a click, enabling millions to see injustice that perhaps once would have been kept under wraps. As stated in the findings, Facebook users banded together to create ways in which Iran's Internet censors could be overcome. I am not sure that other media tools have ever provided such simple, easy and even anonymous access

to information on overcoming censorship. Social media may have the ability to further freedom of speech and overcome censorship more than any other media in history.

In Chile, the primary need of citizens after the earthquake was not freedom of expression. Chile's main needs surrounded material damages and personal loss, rather than freedom of expression. Consequently, Facebook groups dedicated to the Chilean earthquake focused on raising funds to repair private and public damage. Chile suffered billions of dollars in damages, hundreds of people were injured and killed, and many went missing Again, Facebook groups reflected the need in Chile at the time, suggesting that social media can be nimble enough to adapt to crisis situations in the ways best suited to each particular circumstance.

During the Iranian protests, and in the wake of Chile's earthquake, the role of social media in reporting and supporting the cause of these crises was often discussed in traditional news media. Journalists claimed social media was changing the way in which disasters were communicated, and possibly replacing the role of traditional media. This was because a lot of information coming from these countries came from citizens who were tweeting or posting real-time updates of events. Instead of going to traditional sites such as CNN or BBC, individuals only had to log onto to Twitter or other social media sites to find out the latest, most direct information.

However, upon examination of these Facebook groups, it became clear that most of the groups did not attempt to replace traditional media as an information source. The majority of groups linked to traditional news sources to inform and update members.

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These groups contained information from multiple news sources, providing a convenient, one-stop shop for individuals looking for a wide range of information on a crisis. Some of the groups, mainly those focused on Iran, did claim in their descriptions, or through posts on their walls, to also offer information unavailable for viewing on traditional media. Even groups armed with this claim, however, did not seem to have further evidence that they were actually playing this role, despite their desire. In fact, these groups often linked to traditional news sources as well. Though it may be impossible to determine, it did not seem like any members or administrators of the groups studied provided unique information that was then picked up by mass media. Though social media may make this possible -- as proved by the YouTube video of Neda's death -- an examination of these Facebook groups demonstrated such a role was not the norm, suggesting that social and traditional news mass media can best serve the public interest in a complementary, rather than adversarial, way.

Even when groups did provide information seemingly first-hand, it was often wrong or misleading. Numerous times, on the walls of groups focused on Iran's elections, members discussed how Neda was 16 years old or how she was with her father as she died. These were merely rumors, which were corrected as traditional media spread accurate information regarding the incident. Consequently, it seems that even if social media can provide direct, first-hand information, it is difficult to rely on the accuracy of this information. Traditional media, however, has the means and structure to provide accurate information, for the most part.

Judging from these findings, I believe that social media is not replacing traditional media; rather, it is complementing traditional media by providing a forum where individiuals can discuss, react, share, or act upon information received through mass media. I think social media can be empowering for individuals, for it enables them to no longer be passive consumers of mass media. This was expressed in Facebook groups by members discussing news stories, and by members urging people to send their personal videos to news organizations that provided the opportunity for individuals to upload personal content. For example, CNN's iReport provides this opportunity.

These findings also indicate that traditional media still play a critical role in society, a role that cannot be filled by the new phenomenon of social media. I believe the rules and structure of traditional media help ensure that information presented through it is more reliable than information posted through social media. Traditional media play a critical role as gatekeepers of information, deciding which information is accurate enough to go forward, and eliminating information that is not. There is still a need for a professional news organizations to regulate the flow of information. Also, traditional media have the resources to obtain information that users of social media may not. For example, social media users can describe what is happening on the street, but most lack the ability to obtain contextual information such as the opinions of authorities. A citizen on the streets of Tehran may not be able to get a quote from President Ahmadinejad, but a reporter from The *New York Times* has enough prestige to demand an explanation from the president. Although this view may be contested, I believe traditional media is necessary,

for major newsgathering institutions themself are respected enough to demand information from people regular citizens do not have access to.

Traditional media also has the time and resources, ideally, to research an issue or event and provide information that puts the real-time events being tweeted by individuals into context. For example, a citizen in Chile may tweet that her house has been ruined by the earthquake, but it is harder for her to determine how many other houses have been ruined, and the overall damage the earthquake has caused in her country. A reporter with The *New York Times*, based in Chile, would have the resources to gather such information, and relay it to a wide audience. Traditional media, therefore, is a critical component of society. The suggestion that social media cannot replace mass news media has urgent implications, because lately, the resources available to traditional media have been declining. News organizations are being forced to shut down international bureaus, and research budgets are being slashed (Nichols & McChesney, 2009; Hamilton, 2009). For example, *Time* magazine had 26 foreign bureaus in 1986, and by 2008 that number was down to 14 (Hamilton, 2009). This is disturbing as the need for international correspondents and research budgets is as large as ever. Individuals cannot fill this role, for they lack necessary resources. Hamilton (2009) states that today, "everyone can be a foreign correspondent" (p. 478), thanks to social media technologies. However, this is not true. I believe it is important that professional news correspondents are in cities such as Tehran, so reporters can gather contextual information and information from authorities that average citizens do not have access to, and can gather accurate information perhaps not available to just anyone. Social media cannot replace the role of traditional media. It

can only complement it. The decline of traditional media may still have drastic consequences. Investigative reporting and foreign bureaus are needed to hold leaders accountable, expose corruption and promote freedom of expression across the world.

Another interesting finding of this study was that virtual activity was not limited to a virtual realm. It sometimes became manifest in real-world involvement. The virtual world was often used as an organizing forum for real-world activities. Individuals would sign petitions online, which then would presumably be sent to material institutions. Although I have to assume these petitions were sent, as I have no real way of knowing. However, events organized or advertised in Facebook groups did take place. For example, the Green Scroll event was often touted within Facebook groups, and Green Scroll events actually took place in cities throughout the world. The events consisted of Iranians across the world signing a long green scroll; a petition declaring that "Ahmadinejad is not my president" (Tucker, 2009). Thus, social media might encourage participation and engagement in times of crises that translates into real-world efforts, arguably more than made possible by traditional media use, again suggesting a complementing between social media, news media, and activism.

As demonstrated by the above example, social media also does play a large role in enabling individuals from all over the world to connect to a cause. While traditional media may broadcast throughout the entire world, it does not give people a platform to engage in and connect over a cause. A fascinating fact discovered while researching these 20 Facebook groups was that each contained members from all over the world. Often times, members would encourage one another to translate text, or write in English so that

all could understand. The groups were not geographically specific, and provided an international platform for discussion and connection.

I believe these findings have implications regarding media and globalization. Waters (1995) describes globalization as "a social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding." On the Internet, individuals are not constrained to geographical locations. Two people on opposite sides of the world can communicate and connect in real-time. Perhaps this also has implications on the proximity of an event or issue. Research has shown that news coverage often depends on the proximity, both physical and emotional, of the event or issue to news consumers (Chang et al., 1987). For example, it takes a large event with many deaths in Africa to receive the same coverage by U.S. news source as one death in America. Perhaps, as individuals across the world become more interconnected, people's proximity to world events will change, and potentially influence news coverage. This is a concept that would be well-served by future research, suggesting yet another avenue for convergence between traditional media—providing and factchecking information—and social media that can enable ordinary people to become invested in events outside their normal purview.

Another area I believe would benefit from further research, is studying whether or not individuals' use of social media becomes more publically oriented, or more political, during times of crisis. Did the fact that these two case studies were crises lead to individuals becoming publically involved in them? How would this situation differ if a long-term, social issue was examined rather than a crisis? Among my Facebook friends,

it seems that people become more political during crisis events. I would be interested in seeing if this were true, or if those politically oriented on Facebook always used it as a forum for public affairs and political discussion.

I feel that it is also important to note that my original intention for this study was to research Facebook groups formed by people in Haiti, after Haiti's devastating earthquake which took place January 13, 2010 and killed around 230,000 people (Haiti raises, 2010). However, in searching for groups on Facebook, I realized there was no "Haiti" network. Thus, I could not tell whether or not individuals creating groups were actually based in Haiti, and there were no groups that stated their location as Haiti. The most obvious reason for this is that Haiti is an extremely underdeveloped, impoverished nation. Perhaps the majority of people there do not have access to social media such as Facebook. Class plays a key role in who does and who does not have access to social media, suggesting again that currently it cannot replace the role of traditional media and that its potential for social change remains mitigated by the demographics of its users. For while Americans may be scanning tweets for updates, the majority of the world may not have access to such technology, and thus be still reliant on traditional, inexpensive forms of media, such as radio, for news and information. In fact, a 2009 survey proved that radio is still the most used, influential form of media in the developing world (Leichman, 2009). The global reach of social media is still limited. Most of the world is still dependent on radio, one of the earliest forms of mass communication technology.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

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There are a few limitations to the conclusions in this research. First of all, the only type of social media studied was Facebook groups. Twitter was hailed in both the Iranian election protests, and the Chilean earthquake, as a social media tool that provided first-hand, real-time accounts of each crisis. Twitter is used for real-time updates more than Facebook groups are. Perhaps if Twitter had been studied, different conclusions on the role of social media may have been reached. Unfortunately, at the time this study began, access to Twitter archives was unavailable. As of April 2010, the Library of Congress is keeping archives of tweets dating back to Twitter's inception. Google also has plans to enable users to access Twitter archives, but only dating back to February 11, 2010. Google plans on developing its search tool to eventually enable users to search archives dating back to Twitter's inception, in 2006. Future research will be able to take advantage of the new opportunity to access Twitter archives, and future research definitely should explore the role of Twitter in political and natural crises.

Another obvious barrier is language. Only English-language groups could be examined for this research. Thanks to Google Translate, the few posts within these groups in different languages were able to be approximately translated, but not with the utmost accuracy. To truly see how individuals within Iran and Chile were using social media, groups written in the native languages of Spanish and Farsi should be examined as well. Perhaps groups written in local languages would contain more specific, local information, and offer insight into how social media is used when it is not intended to reach out to a global audience.

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Finally, while only groups that stated their locations as within Chile or Iran, or had administrators in these networks, were examined, it is impossible to tell whether or not these groups were really created by individuals within this geographic location. Facebook does not need inividuals to prove their locations when they sign up, consequently locations could be made up and misleading. To truly know whether or not a group was created in its stated country, one would have to know the individuals who created it.

**Conclusion**

As the capabilities of social media grow, their role in crises deserves to be examined. Many claim social media has the power to improve freedom of speech, and give power to individual users while taking it out of ruling state authorities or even media entities. Additionally, the power of social media to improve disaster response, awareness and support has been hailed by nonprofits, traditional media and individuals users.

Through this study, I was able to gain a clearer understanding of the role social media, particularly Facebook, is playing in both political and natural crisis response. Social media plays a critical role in providing a forum where users can discuss and act upon information, whether by emotionally supporting other users, organizing protests, raising funds or providing a place where members can access multiple sources of information on a subject. Facebook groups do not replace the role of traditional media, however, they complement it and empower users to become active recipients of it.

While it remains to be studied whether traditional news media and social media can truly empower people during political and natural disasters, then, my research suggests that by

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complementing each other's function, they can help provide a more global sources of collective intelligence and serve to create a public sphere less likely to be encroached by state controls and local consumerism.

Social media is a relatively new phenomenon. Like any new technology, it has the power to be used for change. Further understanding of how social media functions in times of crisis, or in movements for social change, could help society take steps in maximizing its potential for good. Hopefully this study served as one small step in furthering knowledge about a tool with powerful capabilities.

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**Appendix**

**IRAN**

**1) Where is my vote? Don't recognize and don't invite Ahmadinejad!**

**Location:** Tehran, Iran
**Members:** 394
**Purpose:** Its members are pro-reform Iranian students asking the EU and US governments not to recognize Ahmadinejad's presidential victory. The group is also requesting that the Italian government rescind its invitation to Iran to participate in the June 2009 G8 summit.

**2) Iran.Why We Protest**

**Location:** Tehran, Iran
**Members:** 209
**Purpose:** To support people protesting the disputed elections in Iran, to provide ways for individuals in Iran to bypass government censorship of the Internet and communicate what is happening.

**3) Free election in Iran**

**Location:** Tehran, Iran
**Members:** 164
**Purpose:** We want free and fair elections for a National Legislative and Constituent Assembly and to transfer power to the representatives of the people of Iran.

**4) Democracy for IRAN…We Support Iranians**

**Location:** Iran, Iran (purposely stated the country twice, it seems)
**Members:** 6, 719
**Purpose:** Support Iranian protesters. "Let's support them in little things which may become big." They aim for 1 million members.

**5) Never Forget Neda Agha Soltan**

**Members**: 4, 224
**Location:** Iran
**Purpose:** "This group is to remind us that they exist, and for us to pay the respect to their spirits that they deserve for their sacrifice." Please remember that this group is created in

honor of everyone who lost their lives in Iran's struggle for equal and civil rights.

No matter what background we come from, we can all agree that the imposed supreme leader must be held accountable to the people and not a special interest groups and cults. We must stand united that these murderous deeds will not be tolerated. Please share disagreements upon other topics on other group

Call to action from it's members, it's not a 'let's just add a glob of friends' group. We will be brainstorming ideas to help weaken the grip of the Islamic Republic of Iran through memorials and other ways. I urge you to discuss any ideas you have in our discussion board "Call to ACTION! Read this and help

### 6) We NEDA Revolution

**Members:** 1,116
**Location:** Azadi Square, Tehran, Iran
**Purpose:** Support. This group is in support of the brave people of Iran fighting for what is right. So far hundreds have given their lives, among these Neda the girl that was deliberately shot to death.

### 7) Neda

**Members:** 38,174
**Stated location:** Tehran, Iran
**Purpose:** They state that *"You Get The Most Updated Independent News Here"*
Otherwise it looks like their purpose is to honor Neda and support the Iranian student freedom movement, so deaths like hers don't happen again.

*"I created this group so that I could inform Iranians of the injustice that has been done in our country and what I personally went through and felt when I saw the video clip of a beautiful young Iranian girl that was shot and died on camera. NEDA May you rest in peace..."*

### 9) FREEDOM FOR IRAN

**Members:** 2, 987
**Location**: Iran
**Purpose**: To honor fallen victims of Iran, support protesters and fight for freedom for Iran. "*The great solidarity of people all over the world gives us the power to force our protests.*" Also to show the world what is really going on things traditional media may not be able to show. *"So we are going to show you the real and brutal face of this unbelievable protest."*

**10) Protest to Iran election**

**Members**: 6, 166
**Stated Location:** Iran
**Purpose:** Protests Iran's election results, spread news of the events in Iran, support protesters. *"Please show links, articles, thoughts and prayers for everyone"*

**CHILE**

**1) US HELPS CHILE AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE AND TSUNAMI**

**Members:** 336
**Stated Location:** Santiago, Chile
**Purpose:** group created to inform people about the earthquake and create awareness.

**2) earthquake in chile-terremoto en chile**

**Members:** 3, 542
**Stated Location:** Republica de Chile
**Purpose:** To help their brothers of south America, because of the earthquake

**3) SUPPORT CHILE'S EARTHQUAKE VICTIMS**

**Members:** 947
**Stated Location:** Santiago, Chile
**Purpose**: Essentially, to support Chile's earthquake victims

**4) Chile Earthquake Help**

**Members:** 168
**Stated location:** Chile
**Purpose:** to help Chile after its earthquake

**5) 02/27/2010 Chile's Earthquake Survivors --- Sobrevivientes Terremoto Chile**

**Members:** 152
**Location:** None, but creator is in a Chile network
**Purpose:** a space for Chile's earthquake survivors to support each other, or share

information

### 7) How to Help Chile (earthquake)

**Members:** 511
**Stated location:** none, but admins' network is Chile.
**Purpose**: Group created to "report as in Chile." Not sure if that means report the situation in Chile? And to boost aid to help those affected.

### 7) LEVANTEMOS CHILE ¡¡¡ HELP TO CHILE

**Members:** 198
**Location:** Santiago, Chile
**Purpose:** To provide information needed to help after the Chilean earthquake.

### 8) Earthquake 8-8 Chile

**Members:** 65
**Stated location**: None, but the admins are in networks in Chile.
**Purpose:** To stand with the people of Chile. Support them after the earthquake.

### 9) HOW TO HELP CHILE / CÓMO AYUDAR A CHILE

**Members:** 421
**Stated location:** None. But, the admins are in Chile networks.
**Purpose:** Provide ways to help Chile in the aftermath of its quake.

### 10) Catastrophe in Chile, would you like to help?
**Members:** 321 members
**Stated location:** None, but admins are in Chile networks
**Purpose:** "The objective of this group discussion is to provide people, who are interested in collaborating with the Chilean nation affected by the earthquake, with information related with this disaster and how to help this country."