Review:

Media, Power, and Politics in the Digital Age. The 2009 Presidential Election Uprising in Iran

Zuzana Krihova

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

In the light of the recent presidential elections in Iran, a collection of academic essays – Media, Power, and Politics in the Digital Age – edited by Professor Yahya Kamalipour provides us with a unique retrospection. It allows us to follow the dramatic and controversial 2009 elections in Iran, while exploring some more universal topics such as the interplay of media, power and politics, or the role and impact of modern communication technologies.

Unlike the recent post-election situation, Iran's June 2009 presidential elections sparked massive protests after the disputed victory of president candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. While the regime tried to spread false reports about the allegedly calm situation, barring foreign journalists from covering the demonstrations. Meanwhile cyberspace started to provide a range of diverse voices and first person accounts of what was actually happening in Iran. With the increase in crackdowns on protesters, news of the chaos was disseminated via social media networks such as Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, Wikipedia, YouTube, Flickr and other media services. The reports reached a global Internet audience and mobilized support.

Against this background, Media, Power, and Politics in the Digital Age focuses on several objectives, carefully selected by Professor Kamalipour in the introduction to the book. Thus we are offered a truly diverse number of perspectives to explore. The volume provides 24 essays by researchers, scholars and media professionals; each of them analysing a set of fixed topics from different angles. Although the central tenet of the volume is coverage of the Iranian elections by global media and online citizen journalists, the scope of the book is not limited only to the Iranian experience. Kamalipour emphasizes that the book was intended to provide "a multifaceted and balanced discussion of the role and impact of modern communication technologies" and this universal appeal was more or less observed by all contributors.

Quite predictably, it puts forth the question of whether the history of recent events in Iran tells us something remarkable about the impact of social media technologies, or – in the rather alarming allegation published in Li Xiguang and Wang Jing's essay (citing Howard Rheingold), it raises the issue of whether human society really is "gradually changing its social structure and methods of exchanging information?" Throughout the book we can find this leitmotif of exploring the role of social media and questioning its impact on political mobilization.

Various authors remind us that a shift in the media system has been enabled by digital media. Social media are celebrated alongside mainstream media due to their ability to provide access to first-hand information sources and to facilitate the easy distribution of news by ordinary citizens. While acknowledging the capacity of social media to bring the voices of those affected by the uprisings to far wider audiences than ever before, the authors warn against the abuse or misuse of social media by pointing out its ability to spread false or exaggerated news as well. Despite these alerts, the writers repeatedly remind us that even CNN and Western mainstream media used social media to spruce up their reports on Iran and "that it was perhaps the first time a political issue of this magnitude had been dealt with by people after the spread and use of these networking tools," as Mahboub Hashem and Abeer Najjar observe.

One should also note that the year of publication (2010) was just one year after the elections. Still, a critical distance was maintained and the essays seem to be well-balanced in their content. The book is divided into four parts: (1) Global Media Dimensions, (2) New Media and Social Networking Dimensions, (3) Ideological-Political Dimensions, and (4) Cultural and Communication Dimension. The editor warns us that in some cases the chapters overlap these general themes, but that doesn't matter significantly. What we find a bit more problematic is the structure of the book itself; serving one reader while restricting another. As the essays roughly match up within each part, segmented categorization helps the readers to focus on the selected dimensions, based on their choice. But when reading the book from its very beginning, the sequence of topics might discourage the reader to reach the book's high point, which is found in the second half of the book rather than the first.

The book starts with the essays describing the coverage of the elections by different international media and websites, for example CNN and Al-Jazeera, Canadian, Polish, Turkish or German media. It certainly provides us with very interesting reflections and comparisons: we can follow different views on the power of the news media, trace a debate about the CNN effect or the CNN effect as a myth, study an interpretation method for media-framing, compare the Velvet Revolution concept of the East European experience with the "it never happened" Iranian one, juxtapose the articles in the Iranian and Egyptian constitutions dealing with freedom of expression's double meanings, et cetera. It could be very worthwhile to examine these topics, but in the context of, not prior to, the following parts of the book: mainly the third and the forth parts.

As the readers gradually uncovers more and more interesting chapters, they may start to wonder whether certain parts of the previous essays wouldn't have simply been far more enlightening, had they been able to read later parts of the book in advance. For example, for a reader not aware of the cultural background of the Iranian television news network (called Press TV), which is mentioned in one of the initial chapters, it may be a bit

difficult to distinguish this official Iranian network (broadcast in English) from the other international or Iranian exile media. Nonetheless, it is only at the beginning of part four (dedicated to cultural dimensions) in chapter 19, written by renowned film and diaspora theoretician, Hamid Naficy, that we come across a profound explanation of this "combat" network, Press TV. The latter was launched by the Iranian regime with the single purpose of challenging the alleged cultural assault from the West.

Although the segmentation of essays according to different dimensions makes sense, it prevents the reader from comparing the various analyses of the same issues. This is because these subjects are dispersed throughout the book and not linked together in a more concise style (e.g. the tragic death of Neda Agha Soltani viewed from several different points, the examination of the so-called CNN effect, or various analyses of TV court trials in the aftermath of the elections). This divergence may seem to be more striking in the case of essays that contradict one another; such as in Parsi, Elliot and Disney dealing with Iran's online opposition in chapter 15 and Li Xiguang and Wang Jing focusing on E-diplomacy at the end of part two (chapter 13). Both essays imply criticism of the American approach towards Iranian social media. Yet while one team accuses, albeit indirectly, America of being too active in promoting its E-diplomacy by means of social media (and serving mainly its own purposes), the other criticizes the US policy of limiting this flow of information to Iran due to IT sanctions: "In the battle over information in post-election Iran, American sanctions often posed an important barrier to Iranians looking to make their voices heard" (Parsi, Elliot and Disney in chapter 15). Were these two essays to appear in the book one right after the other, this contradiction might appear to be an intentional comparison, but since there is another chapter between these two, and both essays belong to different parts of the book, the inconsistency seems rather disruptive. And again, the theme of public diplomacy (both Iranian and American) is also examined by Hamid Naficy, but again no sooner than several chapters after the other two essays. Considering the book's voluminous proportions (314 pages), its number of contributors (32 authors), and their variety of approaches, it's fairly understandable that some

discrepancies occur. Professor Kamalipour should be nonetheless praised for his immense effort to bring these different voices together. The scope of the essays is enthralling and, despite its repetitive thematic nature, it offers a truly comprehensive approach.

To answer our question from the beginning of our review, whether we can trace some changes in social structure and in methods of exchanging information in human society, the readers are given a rather versatile range of viewpoints from which to choose. While most of the writers contribute, with more or less ambiguous stances, to the continuing debate about the relationship between traditional media and social media, the final chapter written by Michele Bach Malek provides a very explicit answer: "The primary controversy with this burgeoning media phenomenon is not with its subsistence, accessibility or prospects but with its disorganized, random and unverifiable nature. Social networking sites, as they exist today, will not and cannot replace or critically challenge the overall efficacy of professional traditional news media." This is good news for cybersceptics; yet it still also partly implies the role new media played in the Iranian presidential elections. That is, it acknowledges the interplay of media and politics, while admitting that the real impact of social media on Iran and the future of its society has yet to be fully determined.

Zuzana Kříbová