

## SOCIAL REVOLUTION

# Tweet revenge

How Twitter is changing the way the world protests

**HEDIRMAN SUPIAN**  
hedirman@mediacorp.com.sg

THIS week, I watched an Iranian woman, Neda Agha-Soltan, die from a gunshot wound.

I wasn't there to witness it. The link to the disturbing footage had accompanied a tweet from a friend, which stated: "Why you should care about Iran".

Captured by a bystander on a mobile phone, uploaded onto the Internet and propagated online via sympathetic Twitter users the world over, the arresting footage has transformed Neda into a martyr for the civil unrest that has unfolded in Iran since the landslide victory of incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in a disputed presidential election.

The micro-blogging Internet service — so-called because it allows users to disseminate only 140 characters — has enabled Iranians to collectively piece stories, links and images to illustrate the troubled Middle Eastern country to the rest of the world. It seems that what was once largely dismissed as a product made for the short attention spans of the wired generation is now serving as a hyper-connected version of Morse code.

"It's incredible the way a simple social networking tool like Twitter is being used to bring critical information to people who don't have access to what's happening in Iran. It's like tweeting for human rights," said undergraduate Aletheia Tan, who has adorned her profile picture on Twitter with a layer of green as a symbol of solidarity with the Iranians.

Closer to home, Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi recently celebrated her 64th birthday in prison as demands for her release by her supporters and even celebrities reverberated across Twitter. Yoko Ono, wife of John Lennon, tweeted: "FREE Daw Aung San Suu Kyi NOW!"

Twitter has several advantages over other media when it comes to information

dissemination. Its real-time updates allow people to document events as they happen, with eyewitness accounts sometimes accompanied by images. By retweeting, or repeating a tweet, Twitter broadcasts messages across the globe at viral speeds.

And the way some countries have reacted to Twitter has validated it as a medium to be reckoned with. Earlier this month, China blocked access to Twitter and image-sharing site Flickr ahead of the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests in a move to censor the circulation of information. And according to a CNN blog post, the US government had asked Twitter to reschedule a maintenance session to sustain the flow of information from Iran at a crucial time.

But Twitter does have its drawbacks. Twitterers may not be objective, and information is hard to verify as well. Recently, a user retweeted false messages on Iran and attributed them erroneously to a correspondent from ABC News.

### OUR LOCAL TWITTERS

The implications of Twitter on politics could be game-changing among young voters who are ever-present online. But few politicians in Singapore have jumped into the fray.

Senior Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports and Ministry of Transport, Mr Teo Ser Luck appears to be the only one from the ruling party who tweets. At a recent Young PAP forum, he reportedly suggested that MPs use Twitter to garner feedback and questions during Parliament.

Mr Teo tweets about his work, his fitness regime and issues such as the Youth Olympic Games (YOG), unemployment and transport fares. Despite his suggestion during the Young PAP forum, he hasn't explicitly solicited suggestions or feedback on parliamentary issues on Twitter yet.

Nominated Member of Parliament Siew Kum Hong, already a blogger, seems more at ease on the online platform, retweeting and starting online discussions by responding to other users. But despite having the most number of followers among local politicians on Twitter, clocking in at 250, he has told TODAY that he has stopped using it.

However, he believes Twitter could be useful in situations requiring real-time updates and for people and organisations with a constant stream of updates that large audiences may find useful and relevant.

"My own usage requirements do not fall into either category. So, I stopped using Twitter ... This is not to say that I will not use Twitter in the future, but I would do so only if my usage needs change in a way that makes Twitter relevant."



AFP PHOTO, WITH TODAY ARTWORK

### WHAT OUR POLITICIANS TWEETED

#### TEO SER LUCK

*twitter.com/SerLuck* — 232 followers  
"There is something lacking in YOG publicity internationally. We need to step it up man!"

#### SIEW KUM HONG

*twitter.com/siewkumhong* — 250 followers  
"Highlights: g'teed 9 opposition MPs+NCMPs, NMPs made permanent, GRCs to decrease in size, at least 12 SMCs. Kudos to PM and Cabinet."



What should politicians Twitter about? Chime in on this story at [www.todayonline.com](http://www.todayonline.com)

Read our idiots' guide to Twitter @ [http://tr.im/todayonline\\_twitter](http://tr.im/todayonline_twitter)

Opposition parties like the Singapore Democratic Party and the Workers' Party also use Twitter to keep their followers up-to-speed with news, the latest outreach efforts and media appearances.

Collectively, the followers of such political figures and organisations in Singapore number less than 730. By comparison, Singapore's top Twitter user, a 15-year-old student, has 81,074 followers.

Pundits say Twitter is not to be ignored, despite its relative infancy as a medium among politicians here.

"Political parties need to be aware of any social domain where conversations are active and aggressive, because these are the same incubators where perceptions are formed as opinions are exchanged. The public's perception is instrumental to the success and effectiveness of any political party," explained digital strategist Patricia Law from the 360 Digital Influence group in Ogilvy's public relations arm.

Quoting figures from Nielsen, she added that with Twitter's annual growth rate of 1,382 per cent, it will be hard to ignore the importance of the online service.

But how can local politicians use Twitter more effectively?

For starters, they can monitor trends as they happen, thanks to the real-time nature of Twitter. By entering search queries like "Singapore Government" (or even "gahmen") using its search feature, Twitter can give a sampling of what's on the minds of local netizens. And just like blogs, the platform can be used to conduct discussions that can help to clarify policies and gather feedback from the public.

Reach, the official feedback channel for citizens to air their views and suggestions on Government policies and national issues, already has a Twitter account (*twitter.com/REACH\_Singapore*) that provides constant updates during events like the President's Address.



**IPS SECUREX**

Plug & Play, Live Video & Audio

**PROTECT your Family with our Wireless IP Camera**

**NOW ONLY \$299\***  
~~Usual Price \$328~~

Call us now at **8428 0409**

[www.ips-securex.com](http://www.ips-securex.com)

\*Prices includes GST **Your Total Solution Partner**