

Twitter 1, CNN 0

But the real winner was an unusual hybrid of old and new media.

On Saturday June 13th, as protests began to flare on streets across Iran, 10.5m American TV-viewers naturally turned to CNN, a cable news channel founded in 1980. It was a vote of confidence in the traditional news media. Unfortunately, instead of protests many of them saw CNN's veteran, Larry King, interviewing burly motorcycle-builders. The programme was a repeat.

No other American television news programme, cable or broadcast, did better (though the BBC and Al-Jazeera were both swifter and more plugged-in). But that was little comfort. Thanks to the internet, dedicated news-watchers knew what they were missing. Twitter and YouTube carried a stream of reports, pictures and film from Iran's streets. The internet also facilitated media criticism. Twitter hosted an extraordinary outburst of fury against CNN and other news organisations. A typical post: "Iran went to hell. Media went to bed."

For a while it looked like a clear-cut victory of new media over old. Cable news channels, which had supplied wall-to-wall coverage of the disappearance of John F. Kennedy junior on another Saturday ten years ago, had neglected a big story. Yet old media recovered. Responding to what Tony Maddox, head of CNN International, delicately calls "real-time audience response", the network ramped up its coverage of Iran. By June 16th Americans were getting decent reports, and even Mr King was paying attention to the story. In a back-handed compliment, the Iranian authorities cracked down harder on journalists.

Meanwhile the much-ballyhooed Twitter swiftly degraded into pointlessness. By deluging threads like Iranelection with cries of support for the protesters, Americans and Britons rendered the site almost useless as a source of information—something that Iran's government had tried and failed to do. Even at its best the site gave a partial, one-sided view of events. Both Twitter and YouTube are hobbled as sources of news by their clumsy search engines.

Much more impressive were the desk-bound bloggers. Nico Pitney of the Huffington Post, Andrew Sullivan of the Atlantic and Robert Mackey of the New York Times waded into a morass of information and pulled out the most useful bits. Their websites turned into a mish-mash of tweets, psephological studies, videos and links to newspaper and television reports. It was not pretty, and some of it turned out to be inaccurate. But it was by far the most comprehensive coverage available in English. The winner of the Iranian protests was neither old media nor new media, but a hybrid of the two.

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