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Communication Media and visual resistance in Iran

In a few days, Iran will again challenge its nation and nation-state. On 14 June 2013, the country will confront another presidential election – an event that became a national crisis, a social catastrophe and a traumatic memory four years ago.[1]

I have previously discussed the importance and the role of Iranian independent documentary filmmakers as well as urban journalists in the recording and representation of the traumatic events of the Iranian presidential crisis of 2009.[2] However, much remains unsaid regarding the significance and function of the visual material and digital resistance art that was created and circulated on the Internet based on this national crisis. This collection is one of the first attempts to discuss the importance of visual resistance and protest art, its circulation via digital media and its function in a peaceful movement which turned into one of the worst and most traumatic events in the history of contemporary Iran. Through the official announcement of the Guardian Council of the Iranian government regarding the approval of four candidates for the Iranian presidential election of 2009 (M. Ahmadinejad, M. Karrubi, M. Mousavi and M. Rezayi), major visual propaganda and media campaigns penetrated Iranian society.[3] Before the election, Ayatollah Hashemi

Rafsanjani, in a speech during Friday prayers, emphasized that Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (I.R.I.B) should collaborate closely with these four candidates to present their views and programs online for all Iranians. Following this, for the first time in the history of post-revolutionary Iran, I.R.I.B dedicated a special online program to debates among the candidates, who could propose their own programs and discuss their opinions of each other face-to-face, freely and openly. During previous presidential elections, I.R.I.B had recorded the debates and, after censoring and editing them, broadcast them on national television but not online.

I.R.I.B's online presentation of the debates greatly aided the peaceful public gatherings and activities of the candidates' campaigns in the streets of Iran, which continued until 11 June 2009, one day before election day. All four candidates could continue their campaigns in their own propaganda offices and also in public places. Most such public activities consisted of peaceful demonstrations in which members of each group held posters, banners, flyers and all sorts of propaganda paraphernalia in support of their own candidate or against the other groups. Here we should emphasise that only the campaigns of M. Ahmadinejad and M. Mousavi had serious activities during the final two weeks before election day.

During this time, streets of Tehran turned to live blogs for peaceful communication between the members of each campaign; a spirit of co-operation and national cohesion could be seen everywhere. Before election day there were no reports of social aggression or political pressure regarding these public activities in the streets, and no one could imagine that such a peaceful sphere could suddenly become a national disaster.[4]

On 13 June 2009, with the immature, irresponsible and unofficial interview of M. Mousavi regarding his gain in the presidential election on one hand[5]), and the message of congratulations from I.R.I.B. (even before the official announcement of the Interior Minister) regarding the success of M. Ahmadinejad in the presidential election on the other[6], the bubble of the peaceful process of the presidential election and its public activities suddenly burst. The situation became even worse when the new president, M. Ahmadinejad, invited all of his followers to gather in Valiasr Square in Tehran on 14 June 2009. It was there, during his speech, that M. Ahmadinejad publicly insulted M. Mousavi and his followers,

referring to them as "dust particles which are doing things in the corners."[7]) By saying this, Ahmadinejad confirmed that Mousavi and his followers had no right to reject the result of the election. Moreover, I.R.I.B, by broadcasting all of Ahmadinejad's speeches a few times on all the national channels, proved its alignment with the new president and made the situation even worse[8].
From this moment, public clashes during demonstrations and the destruction of public property became the order of daily life in most Iranian cities, especially Tehran. Anti-riot police and the secret service secured all of the streets in the capital, as well as those who rejected the results of the election. Soon the latter, the Green Movement, came into the streets to express their dissatisfaction. From this time, little by little and day by day, the peaceful pre-election propaganda turned into anti-regime and anti-Islamic government slogans.

In response to Ahmadinejad's gathering, on 15 June 2009, Mousavi and his followers arranged a massive public demonstration to protest the results of the election; this demonstration turned into one of the major anti-regime meetings of the post-election – or, better to say, post-revolution – period in Iran. Azadi Square was selected as the gathering point, and thousands of Mousavi's followers joined this demonstration. The slogans expressed rapidly changed from statements of dissatisfaction with the election to anti-regime sentiments and serious criticism of the activities and contributions of the Islamic Republic regarding Lebanon and Hezbollah in Gaza.[9] Also, for the first time, people in the street attacked a Bassij centre; subsequent firearm exchanges between Bassijis and civilians resulted in the deaths of many youths in the streets of Tehran in the middle of the day.
Since this event, hidden governmental cameras, personal cellular phones and CCTVs have become increasingly important tools for both sides to captures images of street events, but they are employed in two completely different ways.[10] The regime and its secret service used these images to locate and arrest anti-regime demonstrators, while demonstrators broadcast these images via Facebook, Twitter, Skype and other online networks to inform the rest of the world about the activities of that period in Iran.[2] In the absence of foreign media in Iran, especially after the presidential election period, urban journalism became one of the primary tools for those in the West to follow internal events in the country.

From the first week following the official announcement of the results of the presidential election, the rhythm and aim of public events and demonstrations changed completely. Ahmadinejad's name disappeared from slogans, and the primary targets became the regime and its Supreme Leader.[11] Clearly, the presidential election crisis had become a national predicament that could result in regime change. The most important demonstrations of the post-election period in this regard happened during Qods Day (18 September 2009), Student Day (4 November 2009) and the day of Ashura (27 December 2009).
From 15 June to 27 December 2009, the streets of Tehran became the site of battles between supporters of the regime and its riot police on one side and, on the other side, supporters of Mousavi. Unfortunately, during these urban conflicts many civilians and innocent people were killed, imprisoned or disappeared. Many others left the country out of fear of the regime.

Moreover, most of the Western media tried to broadcast news which they received from Iran in hopes of changing the regime. After all of these political crises and social injustices, since 2009 the leaders of the Green Movement have been in enforced home exile, the mothers and families of the killed youth are mourning, many are in jail, many others have left Iran, and no one asks how Iran could be today if the leaders of the Green Movement had been elected as president of Iran in 2009.

Digital Resistance Art and its Role in the Iranian Presidential Election Crisis of 2009

The Iranian presidential election of 2009 provided an opportunity for artists inside and outside Iran to express their feelings and ideologies regarding this national crisis. All sorts of visual artists – graphic designers, painters, photographers, multimedia performers, and filmmakers – were engaged in this national resistance in different ways.[12] Talented young artists created their own local workshops, and, alongside them, eminent artists dedicated their time, space and energy to this movement. Perhaps the last time Iranian visual artists were engaged in such national resistance activity was 34 years ago, during the Iranian revolution of 1978–79. At that time the technologies and materials

of visual and performing arts were quite different than they are today, and therefore most of the visual propaganda and slogans were limited to handmade or silkscreened flyers, posters and banners as well as wall graffiti. During the Iranian revolution the main aim was to change the regime, and all groups worked to achieve this. However, it seems to me that artists, and especially those who were engaged in visual art, had way(s) of seeing and saying things that were quite different from the messages communicated by art creators of ideological parties. It is rare to find studies of the resistance and protest art of the revolution in Iran. Visual artists at that time worked quite independently and far removed from political groups or ideological factions.[13]

The immediate war between Iran and Iraq (1980–88) completely changed the sphere of revolutionary and resistance art, turning it into war propaganda with new ideological slogans. Many of the artists who were involved in the visual art of that revolution returned to their normal artistic lives, and their work remained forever in their workshops.[14] Instead, a new wave of revolutionary artists entered the market and created massive visual and propaganda art related to that imposed war.[15] However, the resistance art which was created during and after the presidential election crisis of 2009 in Iran is totally different from that of the Iranian revolution of 1978–79, and I think that the two most important points in this regard are: (1) the nature of the resistance and (2) digital technology and media communication. Digital art, cyberspace and media communication greatly aided the creation, development and circulation of messages of the Iranian resistance and, consequently, its art around the globe.[16]

During the presidential election crisis of 2009 and mostly in the post-election period, many resistance groups and demonstrators created online platforms, networks and chat rooms through which they communicated within Iran. However, they soon understood that one of the primary, and safest, ways for such online networks and communities to transfer their messages and show their activities to the whole world was through cyber space.

Today, all around the world, activist networks and resistance communities are rapidly adopting new forms of digital tablets, sophisticated and multifunctional cellular phones, webcams, global positioning equipment, digital cameras, and a growing number of other digital and online technologies. With a little creativity, these devices and

media can provide new avenues of self-reporting, passive observation, and participant observation that yield valuable insights and new opportunities for political groups and activists to transfer their messages to the world. Digital technologies, communication media and, therefore, digital life and activities have become ubiquitous.[17]

A growing body of scholarship focuses in a more serious manner on the ways in which digital technologies fit within people's daily practices – how such technologies are integrated within the practices that constitute communities[18], or how internet-based technologies augment or remediate our sense of physical place.[19] As Forte notes, the mainstream media's privileged position of broadcast centrality in the control and direction of information has been, some might still argue, significantly eroded by the emergence of new media technologies, of many-to-many communication and narrow-casting. If the printing press enabled or determined the creation and institution of nationalism, of the nation as an imagined community, then it is possible that the Internet, and specifically social media, is helping to bolster, if not create, new social movements and empowering diverse sections of civil society in their struggles against the state, against governments and corporations, and even against each other.[20]

We thus witness a range of concerns in the literature on politics and power in/via the Internet, ranging from new utopian conceptualizations of a cyber-democracy to critiques of balkanization and fragmented associations to serious worries that social media are the best state surveillance tool yet, permitting heightened policing of citizens, or even crowd-sourcing intelligence for the cause of national security.[21] Anyone can use social media to organize causes and project political messages, including states and their military and intelligence agencies – witness the techniques of soft power and genetically modified social movements.[20]

Students of cultural media are also interested in observing the ways in which activists and political and resistance groups use such digital and online communication technologies for transferring their messages to the world. In this view MacWilliams states:

For marginalized religious and political groups, the Internet is a powerful tool for informational and organizational purposes. As a communications medium available to anyone with a computer and modem, the Internet easily allows groups to explain who they are, what

they believe, and why they live the way they do. Since cyberspace is still relatively unrestricted by governmental regulations and monopolization by giant corporate media conglomerates, marginalized groups can take advantage of the internet's open access for protest and resistance. On their websites, they are free to challenge the negative stereotypes about them that appear in the mainstream media, and to attack the perceived injustices against them by the powers that be.[22]

Such resistance websites illustrate the need to apply social theory about community to computer-mediated communicative relationships. As cyber-sociologist Fernback posits, community is not simply a "materially determined, pre-existing physical reality" but a symbolic construct. Communities share not only actual places but also symbolic worlds in which any "object, act, event, quality, or relation can serve as vehicle of conception." Such socio-cultural systems of symbols provide individuals with a sense of identity and meaning by semiotically representing their "common interests, values, economical livelihood, behaviors or roles." Computer-mediated communication is itself such a symbolic construct, one that is electronically reproduced in the non-place of cyberspace but is nonetheless a gathering place for a "community of meaning." While people interacting online may be dislodged from their ordinary social relations in physical space, cyberspace provides them with a new, symbolically real, space in which to communicate and commune with each other.[23] In this regard, Juris suggests, such movements belong to a particular class of "computer-supported social movements" (CSSN).[24]

Today, one of the main languages and mediums for such online resistance and digital activism is certainly digital resistance art. In this regard, one of the primary issues in this field of research is the connection(s) and relationship(s) among virtual art, cyberspace and a subsequent digital aesthetic. Students of visual culture have demonstrated that the visual is inextricably linked to on-going social, political, psychological and cultural struggles.[25] These struggles occur on numerous cultural fronts and through multiple media, including community celebrations, television programs, advertisements and digital environments.[26] According to visual culture theorist Mirzoeff, the human experience is now more visual and visualized than ever before, and visual culture is not only part of our everyday lives, it is our everyday lives. He explains that, "visual culture directs our attention away from structured, formal viewing settings like the cinema and art gallery to the centrality of visual experience in everyday life".[27] Duncum also has

identified the everyday aesthetic experience as an often-overlooked but important location from which many of our attitudes and beliefs, and much of our knowledge, are shaped. He characterizes our everyday aesthetic experiences as significant sites where ideological struggles occur, often without our conscious knowledge, and argues that this imperceptibility makes them difficult to resist.[28]

Aesthetically speaking, as Popper notes, virtual art is the artistic interpretation of contemporary issues, not only with the aid of technological developments but also through their integration with them. Such an integration or combination allows for an aesthetic-technological logic of creation that forms the essential part of the specificity of the virtual artworks.[29] As for the aesthetic advances of virtual art, they are due to the potentialities given to individual artists to develop these techno-aesthetic categories in connection with plastic, narrative, socio-political, cultural and still other issues. If the term "virtual" in this context involves a certain ambiguity because it is meant to play on a philosophical paradox between the virtual, the potential and the actual (and even between the virtual and the real), this can only be considered an advantage of virtual aesthetics.[30]

According to Featherstone, the aestheticization of everyday life refers to the rapid flow of signs and images that saturates the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society.[31] A concern for everyday aesthetic arises from the societal turn toward the cultural and the simultaneous turn of the cultural toward the visual. This reflects both the very different sites of everyday culture and diverse attitudes toward their experience. Condemned by some scholars for being superficial and self-referential, it is applauded by others for offering both immense pleasure and rich resources for the construction of identity.[32]

For Khan the "political" and the "aesthetic" are antithetical concepts conflated in the expression "political aesthetic." The "political" is commonly associated with the immediate, socio-economic, i.e., ,historical reality: not only what we see and observe from phenomenological perspective but also the dynamic distribution of space and time within individuals associate into collectives, engaging in praxis, commitment and the transformation of existing forces of production and their concomitant relations of production. In this regard, he argues that the "aesthetic" is understood in the Kantian sense as a "system of a priori forms of determining what presents itself in sense experience".[33] In other words, "aesthetic" is the realm of forms, the spiritual realm of

ideas, of a priori categories that help us understand the sense perceptions of reality as it is.[34]

Resistance art and the political aesthetic which artists used in their work during the Iranian presidential election crisis of 2009 give us a unique opportunity to explore the ways in which cultural, visual and political symbols, icons and allegories united to create a new wave of visual activism in twenty-first-century Iran. For more than 30 years, the Iranian regime was the official curator of all types of revolutionary, propaganda, and political visual art of the country, and the resistance artists of Iran's presidential election crisis had only a few weeks in which to create and circulate their own art. It is very important to understand the ways in which visual artists were involved in political activities from the beginning of the presidential campaigns, to what extent they used icons, symbols and aesthetics in their works, and how and with which mediums they presented their artwork. Also, it is quite astonishing to see that the peaceful political art of the pre-election period turned into digital resistance art with new political and activist messages which resulted in the use of new visual elements, symbols and aesthetics in the post-election period. This collection is one of the first attempts to recognise this new wave of digital activist art in Iran and hopes to pave the way for further investigations.

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Statues of Tehran, Bahman Kiarostami, 2008, 60’, Iran.

Notes

1. This article is written few weeks before the presidential election of 2013 in Iran. All used images in this article are from internet and most of them removed from the net. Therefore, there are no references or caption for them.
2. Khosronejad 2009.
3. For more information, please watch the documentary *The Real Fake.*
4. However, this does not mean that there were no oral revolts among members of both groups. Indeed, closer to the date of the election, slogans and critiques changed from their peaceful forms into serious critical propaganda.
5. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPiy_BEmt7A (accessed 3 June 2013
6. M. Ahmadinejad 62.63%, M. Mousavi 33.75%, M. Rezayi 10.73% and M. Karrubi 0.85%.
7. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwM5ab-QfY (accessed 3 June 2013
8. For more information in this regard see Khosronejad 2009.
9. These anti-Hezbollah slogans came from the idea that the regime used Arab Hezbollah soldiers in the streets of Tehran as anti-riot police against demonstrators.
10. There were also strong debates among independent documentary filmmakers about what their role was during such a public crisis. For further information see Khosronejad 2009.
11. *The Real Fake.*
12. More research is still needed regarding the roles, activities and decisions of each group of these artists in the Iranian presidential crisis of 2009.
13. Here I am talking about artists such as M. Momayez.
14. Most of the mural paintings have also disappeared. For more information in this regard watch *Statues of Tehran*.
15. Artists such as N. Palangi, I. Eskandari, H. Khosrojerdi…
16. Of course, not all of the visual arts of the 2009 crisis were made in digital form. For the role of media communication during those periods in Iran, see Khosronejad 2009.
17. Masten and Plowman 2003.
18. Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002.
19. Walker 2010.
20. Forte 2010.
21. The Iranian case of 2009 is one the best examples in this regard.
22. MacWillimas 2005.
23. MacWillimas 2005, p. 75.
24. Juris 2005.
25. Duncum 2001, 2002; Freedman 2001, 2003; Tavin 2000, 2002.
26. Freedman and Schuler 2002; Krug 2002; Smith-Shank 2002.
27. Mirzoeff 1999, p. 7.
28. Duncum 1999, 2002.
29. Popper 2006, pp.1-2.
30. Popper 2006, p.396.
31. Featherstone 2007.
32. Duncum 1999, p. 295.

33. Rancière 2006, p.13.
34. Khan 2012.