Mapping the political discourse of the Iranian Green Movement

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Recognizing the creative political communication strategies initiated by the Iranian Green Movement in June 2009 following disputed presidential election results is essential in order to broaden the currently narrow conceptualizations and considerations of the ‘Arab spring’ and contemporary mediated protests. We consider how the Green Movement articulated alternative discursive strategies in their resistance to perceived voter fraud in Iran, leading to numerous arrests and violence. The Green Movement emerged with an imaginative civil disobedience campaign, worth exploring as a creative communication strategy toward political resistance.

Keywords: Iranian Green Movement, Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, iconic images, Neda Agha Soltan

Introduction

Our case study focuses on events from 22 Khordad of 1388 /12 June 2009, the date of Iran’s disputed 2009 presidential election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Mir Hossein Mousavi, an opposition candidate, charged Ahmadinejad with large-scale electoral fraud. Collective agreement with this concern inspired widespread protests, not only in the city of Tehran, but also within other regions of the country. This national mass demonstration included millions of Iranian people, engaging in what came to be known as the Iranian Green Movement, which was particularly active in the six months following the 2009 election. The movement launched an imaginative civil disobedience campaign, the most significant in the country since the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979.

Our analyses map the character of this discourse as creative, in its strategies, and as transnational, in terms of language, distribution and gendered expectations. Despite emphases in Western media on the prominence of digital media in mobilizing activism, the Green Movement worked through a variety of convergent and versatile communications, from the traditional sweet desserts concocted in commemoration of the Tragedy of Karbala that were inscribed with political statements in cinnamon powder, to graffiti on buses, street curbs and walls of ‘marg bar khamnei [death to Khamnei]’, and resistance slogans written on national currency. With this last instance, of money stamped with anti-regime messages such as green victory
signs, we consider how the material bill serves as a site for resistance against state-controlled artefacts, and is re-appropriated as symbolic currency in political protests.

We consider the transnational character of this national movement, through the mobilization of artists and movements outside of the country. While the death of Neda Agha-Soltan during the 2009 protests became reconfigured as iconic in virtual global space, compelling images were also circulated through stamps and posters, in English, composed in a green colour, distributed through postal and digital channels. It is worth noting the gendered differences in the transnational appropriation of Neda's image and narrative in particular, rather than those of the many other victims. This transnational element, along with the Green Movement's creative communication strategies, suggests a complexity of media practices that need to be understood in cultural contexts.

**Media and politics in cultural contexts**

Media studies are strengthened when communication is understood as necessarily produced and interpreted in cultural contexts, and when building from scholarship in anthropology (Murphy and Kraidy 2003; Rothenbuler and Coman 2005; Silverstone 2002). Mohamed Zayani (2011) considers anthropological approaches crucial in attempts to understand the complexity of media industries and practices in his discussion of Arab media. The consideration of contexts in which media are created and understood, in a variety of cultural conditions, contributes to a more comprehensive understanding than can be provided by the Northern and Western cases privileged in English-language publications (Ginsburg 2005; Postill 2009). Media anthropology guides our exploration of resistance in this particular case, which is based on similar theoretical foundations to those informing Abu-Lughod’s studies of moral and political actions (2005) and television practices in Egypt (2012), and Naficy’s (2013) considerations of diverse institutions contributing to film industry work in 1960s Iran.

Media anthropology highlights a diversity of organizations and communities and their abilities to engage in political resistance. Organizations and communities organize political expression across a range of agendas, from those of dominant elites in control of governments and aligned institutions, to those of groups resisting corrupt leadership and unjust policies. In this analysis, we focus on political expression as a form of communication in protests against current regimes. Political protests have emerged as critical venues for advocacy against particular policies, and also against the leadership responsible for oppression. This was the case in Iran, and with many other political protests in the region.

Transnational protests have also engaged more frequently across national boundaries, in occupy movements, along with others in support of human rights, environmental protection, and labour support. Social movements transcend national boundaries when they advocate on behalf of a community or cause relevant across
countries, and their mobilization across territorial boundaries has been enabled by the advent of digital media. While the ability of transnational social movements to mobilize constituencies and share messages widely is certainly facilitated by new technologies, Western literature, in the press as well as in academic discussion, has focused too much attention on digital media in protests, missing other valuable and accessible forms of expression. Our framework is informed by a broad theory of communication that goes beyond a media-centric focus, and foregrounds political contexts in which protests emerge from social movements.

Political context serves as the foundation that structures hegemonic assertions of power as well as potential resistance. This key point in our theoretical framework means that we do not assume political protests are spontaneous, as argued by Castells (2012), or chaotic, but clear political articulations and challenges deriving from communications interventions and venues. We share in the theoretical approach to political communication argued by Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheafer (2013), that not only do political conditions matter in giving rise to collective action, but also in understanding the consequences of political protests. In their summary of their comprehensive analyses of political contexts and media use in 21 Arab communities, they conclude that:

When looking at what has transpired since the start of the Arab Spring, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that politics not only came first but also last. The case of Egypt is instructive in this regard. The Muslim Brotherhood had little to do with initiating the initial protests and they were probably not the most frequent users of social media. However, they did have the best political organization available and were ultimately able to win both the parliamentary and presidential elections. Politics, it would seem, is important in the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. (Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheafer 2013:132)

Markham agrees, particularly with regard to understanding political protests in the Middle East and North Africa, that the problematic ‘valorization of amorphousness in protest cultures and social media enables affective and political projection, but overlooks politics in its institutional, professional and procedural forms’ (2014:89). Elsweewi (2011) and Markham argue against the idea that individuals form ‘liberated political imaginaries’ enabling spontaneous eruptions against government regimes. Political protests of such magnitude emerge through histories of frustration and oppression, enabled not only by mediated technologies but also by social networks.

Political protests may emerge within particular historical conditions that privilege some groups over others, but also build on social connections towards collective strategies of civic engagement. Our perspective seeks to build on theories of political and social change to understand the conditions that enable social movements to mobilize constituencies, articulate alternative discourses, shift norms,
change policies and remove leaders from positions of power. Social movements are quite varied, from those in support of government policies to those arguing against particular policies or even against entire regimes. These social movements may also be highly organized, operating from well-funded and structured bureaucratic organizations, or through alliances of ‘self organizing networks,’ working through ‘connective action’ that builds as participants share ‘personalized content’ across digital-media networks (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Juris further differentiates a ‘logic of networking’ that coordinates actions across diverse participants, from a ‘logic of aggregation’ that involves the assembling of masses of individuals from diverse backgrounds within physical ‘spaces’ (2012:260). Transnational movements such as those advocating global justice rely on these connective horizontal and open networks to organize communication messages as well as to mobilize individual movement into public space for collective protests. Social movements, when possible, may integrate ‘virtual’ with ‘physical forms of protest and communication (as) mutually constitutive’ (ibid.).

**Mediating political protest**

Political protests are mediated through a variety of communication strategies, invoking symbolic messages and coordinating logistical support. Political communication and sociology have considered media interventions as critical components of protest strategies even before the advent of digital media, but contemporary digital landscapes have inspired more attention to their role. While the growth of research in this area is important for understanding the potential for political resistance, there may be more enthusiasm for the power of communication technologies than is warranted.

The central argument made by Castells in his recent (2012) volume, as well as in his other comprehensive publications (such as 2009), is that digital media, through their decentralized networks and open access, enable individuals to organize and challenge dominant institutions. In this model, resisting groups are able to engage in counter messages and attempt to change power relationships. Castells envisions digital media as strengthening a public sphere, though Bimber (2000) suggests that these networks may instead fragment civic engagement, undermining the potential of the public sphere.

Castells describes a ‘new public space’ as ‘networked ... between the digital space and the urban space’ (ibid.:11). Lynch (2011) has detailed the emergence of a new public sphere within the Arab world, facilitated through open debate televised on transnational satellite broadcasting stations such as Al Jazeera. While Lynch, Alterman (2011) and others point to the importance of transnational television and access to open political critique as critical conditions in the history of politics in the region, Castells prefers to privilege digital and mobile phones:
Television also played a role, but always used Internet and mobile phones to feed its images and information. In both cases, the movement went from cyberspace to urban space, with the occupation of the symbolic public square as material support for both debates and protests, from chanting slogans in Tunis, to banging pans and pots in Reykjavik. A hybrid public space made of digital social networks and of a newly created urban community was at the heart of the movement, both as a tool for self-reflection and as a statement of people’s power. Powerless was turned into empowerment.

Fenton and Barassi (2011) offer an insightful reconsideration of Castells’ earlier work (2009), problematizing an over emphasis of the power of individuals as agents able to resist dominant authorities; instead, they suggest that ‘far from being empowering’ for individuals, ‘the logic of self-centered participation promoted by social media can represent a threat for political groups rather than an opportunity’ (Castells 2009:180). In privileging individuals as central actors in political resistance, the political and social conditions that create inequalities that constrain collective possibilities for civic engagement are neglected.

The empowerment discourse, prominent in development, social change and political-protest literature, falls short when relying on this individualistic focus, missing critical concerns with ‘how technology and technology use are framed by political issues and issues that concern the development of society, such as capitalist crises, profit interest, global war, the globalization of capitalism, or the rise of a surveillance society’ (Fuchs 2014:18). The dominant framing of digital media, however, is of their liberating potential in the hands of individuals.

Christensen (2011: 237) explains the ‘liberation technology view [as] one in which there is a causal relation posited among specific forms of technology, the expansion of rights, and other forms of economic and social development’. Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheafer similarly describe ‘cyber-enthusiastics’ as those who believe ‘new media’ will ‘empower people living in nondemocratic societies and to allow insurgents to adopt new strategies’ (2013:117).

Those sceptical of the power of digital media recognize the potential for these tools to be used by dominant powers to engage in surveillance and repression. Moreover, Fuchs (2014) believes digital media use may reinforce an illusion of participation, building on weak social ties with low risks, when not combined with ‘off-line’ in-person mobilization in time and space with a broader collective group.

Concerns with the celebration of digital media as a liberating technology are particularly pertinent in discussions of protests in the Middle East. While media do matter, their role in the narrative of protest in the Middle East has been overplayed, particularly by US media (Alterman 2011; Juris 2012; Wilkins 2012), resonating with a long history of privileging media in social change (Lerner 1958). Kraidy (2013)
complains of the attribution of ‘magical powers’ to the ‘mythologized’ digital media, ‘embodied’ with ‘human agency’.

Agreeing with Esfandiari’s (2010) and others’ beliefs that protests in Iran should not be labelled as a ‘twitter revolution,’ Lynch believes that the ‘role of Twitter in organizing the Iranian Green Movement protests appears to have been greatly exaggerated, with its main impact being on external perceptions of the protest rather than on internal political organization or mobilization’ (2011:130), arguing that digital media may in fact matter more to shaping perceptions of events outside of Iran than to strengthening political arguments against the dominant political regime. Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheafer agree that ‘social’ media matter to political protests, but not in the simplistic way argued by enthusiasts; their research suggests that significant use of digital media ‘is much more likely to follow a significant amount of protest activity than to precede it’ (2013:115).

How digital media become part of protest strategies is not just a matter of timing, but also a matter of risk. Reviewing his study of offline social movement protests, Mercea (2012) concludes that digital media use is more central among unaffiliated participants when engaging in low-risk protests, but when these events entail more risk, digital connections are more extensive among those who already know each other. Protests against political regimes would entail more risk than movements approved by local authorities or advocating more narrowly prescribed change.

Recognizing the convergence of mediated experiences, instead of reifying a distinction between ‘offline’ and ‘online’ civic engagement, we consider the complications of mediation in contributing to political discourse (Cammaerts 2012; Martin-Barbero 1993; Silverstone 2002). Our use of mediation builds on Silverstone’s (2002) conceptualization of dialectical structures that offer opportunities as well as constraints, of media both as material artefact and as communicative discourse. Processes of mediation condition the possibilities for political elites to reinforce dominant ideologies that support their position of power, as well as the ruptures that open space for protests to challenge this rhetoric. Communication, then, is more than a matter of a mediated message or channel, but represents mediation within a global visual economy (Andén-Papadopoulos 2013). This framework suggests that it is not just visual culture that signifies political discourse, but that geopolitical conditions promote and constrain the circulation of images as groups struggle for political power.

Digital media offer opportunities for participants to share images by recording them within this global visual economy. This ritual allows them to ‘bear witness’ to traumatic experiences through capturing and distributing visual evidence of violent and oppressive acts. In Zelizer’s (2002) consideration of the traumatic past, she describes how photographs allow individuals ‘to forge a personal connection with a traumatic public past … whereby photographic images stand in for the larger event, issue or setting they are called to represent’ (ibid.:699). Ritual collection and storage
Andén-Papadopoulos (2013) believes that this ritual practice of bearing witness unites participants through shared sentiments of political solidarity. In her study of protests in Burma, Iran, Egypt, Libya and Syria, Andén-Papadopoulos (2013: 754) defines a ‘citizen camera-witness’ as ‘camera-wielding political activists and dissidents who put their lives at risk to produce incontrovertible public testimony to unjust and disastrous developments around the world, in a critical bid to mobilize global solidarity through the affective power of the visual’. While Castells (2012: 107) recognizes the ‘Internet and mobile phone networks’ as more than ‘simply tools’ incorporating ‘organizational forms, cultural expressions and specific platforms for political autonomy’, we argue that our analyses need to include a variety of communication technologies and processes, from the more mundane land-line telephone to the more creative venues of baked goods and financial currency.

Much of the literature on bearing witness in political movements highlights the potential for mobile phones to record and distribute visual images. Based on their analysis of public protests in Denmark 2006 and in Germany 2011, Neumayer and Stald (2014:117) ‘argue that mobile communication can be appropriated to increase activists’ repertoire of actions, foster resistance, and shut down opportunities’. Political activists are able to coordinate activities and assert counter narratives through their collective linking through mobile phones. While seeing social media as working within a more complicated political arena, Rahimi (2011:160) describes the potential for individuals to bridge their personal experiences in street protests with ‘virtual encounters’ in cyberspace.

Despite the potential for mobile phones to aid in the mobilization of resistance, these same devices may also serve as instruments of surveillance and control. Neumayer and Stald (2014:127) explain that making information publicly available on ‘external platforms makes the activists vulnerable to surveillance by potentially hostile authorities’, thereby risking arrest, torture and death. By extending beyond ‘a merely instrumental perspective’, they advocate critical analyses that consider ‘mobile communication and the repertoire of actions in protest through the mobile device, including the power relations that activists seek to challenge’ (ibid.:129).

In helping to understand political protests in 2009 Iran, mediation engages a broader set of communication strategies and processes than just mobile phones. Khosronejad speaks of the significance and importance of digital and visual materials in bringing what was happening in the streets of Iran to a global community (Khosronejad 2013). In our discussion of the media landscape below, we situate digital media and mobile phones within a broader visual economy that affords participants a variety of creative opportunities to assert resistance within transnational contexts.

Prior to the 2009 Iranian Election the streets of Iran had been peaceful, with civil debate among the final two candidates Mir-Hossein Mousavi Khameneh and
Mahmood Ahmadinejad. However, the peaceful momentum shifted dramatically as the final election results were announced, creating turmoil among those who preferred Mossavi. Political advocates organized public meetings to express their concerns over the results of this election. They did not only rely on electronic devices or the power of the Internet, but found many other creative ways to organize their protests.

**The media landscape in Iran**
Contemporary media industries and technologies in Iran comprise a variety of communication possibilities through which protest participants have potential to engage and mobilize, but also risk surveillance and threat. Recognizing the importance of political context in discussions of Iran in 2009, Rahimi (2011) conceptualizes social media not as a ‘means of communication, but as social space wherein confrontational activities of political significance take place’ (ibid.:158). He specifically describes how the government was able to engage in surveillance, thus limiting the potential for cyberspace to be an arena for unfettered coordination of resistance. Christensen (2011), among others, is troubled by studies that have ‘decontextualized theorization and writing on social media in Iran, noting the incredible complexity and variation within the Iranian blogosphere, as well as state responses to technology’ (ibid.:238). He further explains that the ‘supposed use of social networking media such as Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube by anti-government, pro-Mousavi protesters in Tehran in the weeks following the disputed elections was held up as an example of the cosmopolitan nature of young, educated Iranians frustrated with decades of repression’ (ibid.:240).

Contributing to this emphasis on digital media’s role in Iranian politics is the relatively high rate of access to the Internet, particularly compared with other countries in the region. Various estimates of Internet access between 2009–10 put national rates between 43–7 per cent (reviewed in Wojcieszak and Smith 2013), and by 2012 at almost half of all Iranian citizens (Lanzillo 2011; Internet World Stats 2013). Along with this high access, this territory hosts more than 700,000 blogs, crediting Persian as the second-most frequently used language in this form of media (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010). Blogging, as a popular practice within Iran, can be considered a potential ‘space for contention between the people and the state’ (ibid.:vii). Its rapid growth was facilitated by economic liberalization, along with private investment in communication technology industries.

However, counter forces, simultaneously constraining universal access, included relative high costs, poor speed and bandwidth, and the global political context, including US sanctions. Iranian government attempts to constrain Internet use included policies challenging media that worked against the Islamic republic, licensing and limiting ISPs and speeds, filtering and banning sites considered ant-Islamic, and censoring keywords (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010). The Iranian government was able
to block some Internet access and restrict some of the mobile-telephone calls and texts during the protests (Kavanaugh, Yang, Sheetz, Li and Fox 2011; Mueller and van Huellen 2012). Policies enforcing content standards meant activists needed to self-censor or be creative. Iran also instituted an explicit cap on Internet access speeds for households, at 128 kilobytes per second (Open Net Initiative 2014). Combining government policies restricting technology access as well as content led to powerful constraining force acting against the digital media use in political protests (Faris and Villeneuve 2008).

In her study, Kadivar (2015) compares the Iranian government’s response to the Green Movement in 2009 with that of the UK, in response to riots there in 2011, concluding that in both cases social media and mobile phones contributed to protests as well as government surveillance. In another comparison, this time between the Iranian protest and others in the Arab region in 2011, Hernandez (2013) finds salient distinctions, noting the origins of the Green Movement within the Islamic Government of Iran. This particular case illustrates a context in which a political movement operates in a repressive context (Anderson 2013; Pourmokhtari 2014).

According to Sundquist (2013), Green Movement attempts to mobilize were ‘stifled’ by the Iranian government, such that digital media alone would not have worked without other networking strategies engaged through interpersonal connections. These more fragmented strategies were based within ‘informal mobilizing networks and the widespread use of modern virtual space’ (Reisinezhad 2015). Working against one of the ‘most sophisticated state-mandated filtering systems in the world’ (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010:70), activists were able to circumvent government control through hacking and filter-shekan – circumventing technological filters and blocks. Their sophisticated ability to leverage digital resources served activists well, given the particularly pervasive censorship of the Iranian government over broadcast media. Ansari (2013) concludes that ‘digital media played a very significant role in anti-government protests in the Middle East... It has changed the rules of political struggle and established new expectations and rules of confrontation for both protesters and authoritarian governments in the region.’

Although digital media helped demonstrations of the Green Movement reach people outside of Iran, one unintended result was an increase in oil revenue for the government as prices went up given news of unrest in the country, funds that, ironically, were used to defuse the movement (Cross 2010). Although studies of digital media in Western societies highlight their liberating potential, they fail to recognize the importance of political-economic context, which in the case of Iran means they serve as both popular tools, with high access, as well as, ironically, instruments for authoritarian rule.

Impressed with relatively high access to digital media and the prominence of blogging in Iran, some observers of the 2009 protest movement cede credit to the
power of digital media without questioning what people were actually doing when contributing content or watching screens (described by Christensen 2011; Mueller and van Huellen 2012). Based on their survey of 2,800 Iranian youths recruited through an online venue, Wojcieszak and Smith (2013:91) conclude that while the ‘Internet was stated as the most important news outlet, state-controlled television was often used, and Twitter was the least prevalent new media platform’. And when using online venues for conversation, these young respondents were more likely to discuss their personal lives and other technological issues than politics. Internet sources offered news and information to those with access, but most posts from individuals did not address political concerns specifically. Ease of access was also not universal among this group of educated youth: most reported that they often had difficulty accessing Internet content (ibid.:100). Given this challenge, these youths considered using the Internet as a political act in and of itself, a routine ‘rebellion’ (ibid.:106). The routine of engagement through digital media then might become a political act, even if political content is not specifically sought or produced.

While Internet use in Iran was relatively high for the region, it was not as universal as ownership of mobile phones, reportedly near 100 per cent according to Iranian government sources (Small Media 2013). However, to what extent these phones included digital access to Internet channels is unclear. But the capacity for mobile phones to record and circulate images enabled protest participants to reframe the construction of the Green Movement (Rahimi 2011:169). The potential for mobile phones to mediate political events, through bearing witness, highlights their importance as a venue for the integration of the digital with personal connections.

While the logistical mobilization of protests in time and place incorporated connections through a variety of communication strategies, digital media may have had more of an effect on global awareness of the Iranian protestors’ perspectives. Mueller and van Huellen’s (2012) analysis of Iranian policies and participants, along with Western media coverage, suggests that digital media contributed to external constructions of the political concerns in Iran, more so than to the mobilization of anti-regime protests. The political elite within the country had much more control over internal distribution of information, as well as concern with the challenges raised by the protestors, than the global political and economic elite. Within the country of Iran, protests were able to leverage transnational resources through a variety of creative strategies that allowed participants to assert resistant narratives that challenged their government’s articulation of the 2009 elections as legitimate.

**Political expression in the Iranian protests of 2009**

We explore creative and transnational political communication in these protests through considering the canvas of expression, the articulation of messages and the circulation of images on a global stage. Attending to the mediation of these protests, we situate these expressions as having both material and virtual forms. Our sources
of data include archives of public documentation of political events as well as news, made possible by Iranian protestors, citizens, independent filmmakers and urban journalists.

The communication canvas

The variety of walls used to express political resistance demonstrates the creativity of initial challenges to the 2009 elections. These include the actual walls and street curbs used for graffiti, as well as the surfaces of financial currency and desserts, recorded as photographs and videos and distributed through transnational means. Consideration of our first example, graffiti, indicates how physical place becomes connected with virtual space through the mediated recording and circulation of images.

Graffiti

One of the creative strategies engaged by activists builds on the recording and distribution of visual images of graffiti. Studies of graffiti as a political expression underscore the importance of this as an alternative public venue for political communication that goes against dominant official narratives, whether in content or in process, by illegally appropriating public space. Graffiti does not necessarily convey opposing rhetoric, but can be seen as a creative approach to circumventing official attempts to control other forms of communication, such as broadcast and digital media.

Graffiti uses walls in a public place as a territorial boundary or canvas for articulation. Considering the integration of graffiti as material artefact with its circulation through digital means, the idea of the public place may be expanded to include public space (Escobar 2000), something key to the facilitation of transnational movements or mobilization. Moreover, the concept of the territorial wall might now include the idea of public screen, as a digital re-articulation.

Creating messages within a public domain is central to graffiti, conveying a message meant for public visibility. Physical occupation of public spaces engages activists’ strategies to ‘appropriate and resignify urban spaces’ (Juris 2012:268). Those who engage in graffiti can be quite different in their interests and intentions, but share the same vulnerabilities with regards to government control within urban terrain (Iveson 2010). Mubi Brighenti (2010) emphasizes the importance of the public nature of this as a ‘radical interrogation’, so that ‘graffiti can be called a form of resistance only if by resistance we mean an actually creative, productive force rather than simply a reactive one’ (ibid.:329). The opportunity to create counter narratives in place as well as space by those in marginal social positions works within what Mubi Brighenti (2010) calls an ‘urban spatial political economy’, in which walls serve as objects of governance as well as resistance.
The wall as a canvas for opposing rhetoric offers a space for potentially radical messages not easily absorbed through mainstream media. This scholar (2010:323) explains that:

As visible surfaces, walls define a public focus of attention for a number of viewers and actors who are spatially dispersed. Not simply that: each wall collects a temporally dispersed audience that, at some point, has transited nearby. Hence, the wall becomes part of the struggle for public attention and key element in the configuration of an urban regime visibility.

We offer here some illustrations of Green Movement graffiti, in green, challenging the official regime. In the first image (Figure 1), we see the attempt to control the public wall through whitewashing. Other examples of Green Movement rhetoric, specifically asserting collective interests as a focused movement include ‘zendeh bad jonbesh e sabz [viva Green Movement]’ and ‘sabz ha bidarand [The Greens stay aware].’

Creative canvases for political expression
Another means of resistance was through bank notes. Money, officially sanctioned by the government, served an ironic function when re-appropriated for channelling anti-government messages. The image of Neda is discussed in a subsequent section, but here we highlight the anti-government slogans and statements such as ‘one billion bank notes contain slogans’ or ‘a bank note without a slogan is like saying no to the arrival of spring’ (Figure 2). Other examples link national concerns with transnational actors: ‘they stole oil money and giving it to Chavez’ or ‘Khamenei the non-believer is servant of Putin.’ In response to this circulation of challenging messages, an Iranian newspaper published the following (in translation): ‘writing
messages on the bank note is haram [religiously forbidden] attempting to provoke shame through religious sentiment. Continuing this theme of questioning the legitimacy of actions by referencing religion, on some notes the word ‘Republic’ and above the word ‘Islamic’ a question mark, and an exclamation mark appears. On others, a hand-written message below Khomeini’s face contains a quotation from Dr Ali Shariati, one of the most influential Iranian intellectuals of the twentieth century, directly questioning the legitimacy of Ahmadinejad – ‘In a country that only the government is permitted to speak, do not believe any word of that government.’ A series of notes displayed caricature of Ahmadinejad with the caption ‘people’s enemy’.

Continuing along this theme of creative strategies, traditional food such as sweet rice pudding, sholeh zard, is inscribed with cinnamon powder to convey political resistance. For example, this popular dish prepared for religious purposes was re-appropriated to distribute messages for the Green Movement. Several examples included green bow ribbons and pistachios referencing the Green Movement, and carried messages like ‘Ya Hussein, Mir Hussein.’ This is a clever use of the historical Hussein (the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad) who died in the battle of Karbala in what is now Iraq (10th of Muharram, in the year 61 AH or 10 October 680 CE). Historical Hussein (Imam Hussein) is known by Shi’a for his struggle for justice; Mir Hussein is paired with him in a familiar call for the Iranian resistance.
The next image (Figure 3) portrays several bowls of sholeh zard inscribed with cinnamon powder with a variety of symbols and messages, such as a V for Victory. The message on the top bowl reads: ‘Ya Hussein’ (the Historical Hussein of Shia); the next row includes bowls between those with Vs with the names: ‘Mossavi’ and ‘Khatami’; the third row of four bowls read from right to left: ‘We, Again, Grow’; the fourth row of four bowls reads from right to left: ‘Khatami’, ‘Mir Hussein’ (a green bow), ‘Mir Hussein’ and ‘Mossavi’.

The final illustration of a creative canvas is that of the use of public buses as material walls for graffiti expressing political challenges to the regime. In one example we found messages of protest mobilization along with anti-regime rhetoric: ‘25th of Bahman – death to dictator – “Imam Hussein – Azadi” [the location of the meeting], at hour of 15.’ Recognizing the potential vulnerability of this as a venue for political expression, there was also ‘dear driver I beg your pardon [however] we must send our messages.’ Figure 4 illustrates a bus with the message: ‘Death to Khamenei’, which resonates with familiar Green Movement rhetoric on public urban walls.

**Political messages**

These canvasses for creative expression enabled protest participants to articulate resistance messages challenging the legitimacy of the Iranian government. These messages included verbal challenges, illustrated in the previous section, as well as visual references to martyrdom through the symbols invoked and colours used.
Iconic visual symbols offer a collective reference to political sentiment. To do this, they must be easy to interpret, and represent a shared experience or concern. Moreover, visual icons work well in transnational contexts, whereas verbal slogans require translation. Rauh (2013) offers compelling illustrations in her analysis of symbols invoked in 2009 as resonant with political protest strategies from 1979. She suggests that in ‘reclaiming the revolutionary rhetoric and history through visual recoding and reprogramming, the Green Movement protestors and supporters challenged the Islamic Republic’s claim to the legacy of the 1979 Revolution and, thus, the very legitimacy of government authority’ (ibid.:1316).

The visual representation of hands invokes a call for solidarity and action, particularly when showing a clenched fist. The open handprint (Rauh 2013), when depicted next to a clenched fist, signifies resistance to government oppression. These visual images, used in 1979, are repeated motifs in the 2009 protests. The V symbol used in Green Movement rhetoric similarly calls upon the 1979 resistance, as it was used in anti-regime political expressions then as well as in 2009. This symbol of victory was used as a visual stamp, recorded on Iranian currency, as well as being presented by protestors in public spaces (Figure 5).

‘V’ as a symbol invokes victory, working within a transnational context. A victorious ‘V’ references the English term, and while not rooted in Farsi become adopted in the Iranian protest in a way that allows their goals to be understood beyond national borders.

**Colours**

Political expression not only relied on the significance of visual images with historical references, but also imbued messages with colour that resonated with cultural relevance. Indeed green, in colour and in concept, named the movement. The colour
green’s significance is rooted in Islam, leveraged by followers of Mir Hussein Mossavi, and used in a number of Islamic countries in Shi’i shrines, mosques and saints’ tomb covers. Green is also used in various combinations with other colours on the official flags of Muslim nations such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The Qur’an references green frequently, sanctifying this as a significant colour:

Upon the inhabitants will be green garments of fine silk and brocade. And they will be adorned with bracelets of silver, and their Lord will give them a purifying drink.

(Qur’an, Surat al Insan 76:21)

For Shi’a the green colour is associated with the house of the Prophet from which they are descended, commonly known as seyyed, or masters. This associates Shi’ism with the Alh al bayt, members of the house of the Prophet. Also, the familiar green colour used in the movement references the green of spring, engaging a metaphor for re-growth and new life. This rather clever usage of green faced hostile and mocking remarks by the flowers of Ahmadinejad, who referred to the green colour of Green Movement as the sabz e lajani, or ‘green of the sewage’ (obviously something negative and unpleasant), and not the green of the Prophet, sabz e seyyedi. A more recent usage of green was already established during 2009 by the supporters of Ahmadinejad known as sabz e Alavi, the green of Alavi (the followers of Imam Ali the first Shi’i imam).

Figure 6 illustrates how Ahmadinejad’s followers attempted to reclaim green in support of the existing regime. The colour itself, as a sanctified reference to religious legitimacy, became part of the political contest between government and protestors.

In some motifs red would be used with green, to signify the blood of the martyr (the red) shed for Islam (green). Such symbolism was used during the Iran/Iraq war,
where the young Iranian solders would wear a green or red headband inscribed with ‘Ya Allah, Ya Hussein, Labak ya Allah or Labak ya Hussein [answer ya Allah /answer ya Hussein]’. Figure 7 shows a young soldier with a red banner reading ‘Ya Hussein e Shahid [Oh, the martyred Hussein]’ over a green headband, ‘Asheghan e Karbala [the lovers of Karbala]’. The green and red colours are also used during the month of Muharram, representing the martyrdom of Imam Hussein in ta’ziya (martyrdom play). The army of Imam Hussein (Shi’a) is identified by their green costumes, while the opposition army of Yazid (Sunnis) wears red. When black, siyah, is used strategically, it is done with negative connotations. In Persian culture, particularly after Shi’ism became the official religion of the nation (sixteenth century), black was associated with mourning and martyrdom. The black banners and fabrics erected in public during Muharram are an indication of mourning for Imam Hussein. However, at any time during the year, if black banners or cloths were adorned visibly on a house this indicates a death in that household. In the historical context of medieval Islam and the rise of the Abbasid Caliphate,4 ‘the black banners ceased to be an item in the propaganda that had preceded the uprising’ (Khalil 1989:309). The Abbasids not only chose to use black banners, but also adopted black costumes as a symbol of uprising and of their government. Athamina (Cook 2008: 226) notes that the adoption of black was not innovative, but had also been associated with other rebels in Islamic history. It is interesting that the recent uprising of the self-proclaimed ‘Islamic State’ mimics the Abbasids’ mannerisms, adopting black garments and carrying black banners. Black also serves as a symbol of intent to avenge death (ibid.).
Neda as an icon

Other studies of the Green Movement in Iran consider the connection between constructions of gender and the attribution of martyrdom. The heroism of the Iranian women during the Green Movement uprising has been heralded both inside and outside Iran. Images of women’s bravery in peaceful demonstrations and in facing the violent attacks of basiji militias (volunteer forces paid by the government of Iran) offer remarkable documentation of women beaten, arrested and killed during this struggle.

One particular death, that of Neda, quickly gained iconic status. The death of Neda Aghasoltan in June 2009 during the disputed presidential elections, created mayhem. The Green Movement campaigners were quick to announce her as the first ‘martyr’ of the resistance movement. Neda was shot to death accidently, as a bystander, not as a participant, during the political demonstrations. It is ironic that Green Party members chose to refer to her as a ‘martyr’ rather than as a casualty... [Perhaps] Referring to Neda as a martyr strategically spread a divinely ordained, religious mantle over the entire political uprising. Indeed, some the Western media even referred to Neda as the ‘Iran Joan of Arc’.

(Shirazi 2012:114)

The ease with which this visual reference was accepted by transnational actors as iconic of the political struggle derives from gendered ideas of sacrifice and heroism. Women tend to become valued as nationally significant when they are constructed as pure and as sacrificing on behalf of the greater good, whether it is their family,
community or nation. Of the estimated hundreds who died during these protests it was Neda’s image that achieved iconic status (Figure 8).

This poster strategically contains three main colours, green, red and black. It reads, ‘Shahid e azadi, Neda Agha Soltan [The martyr of freedom, Neda Agha-Soltan]’. Of all those killed in the course of this violence, it was the image of Neda Agha-Soltan that grew to iconic stature, signifying her martyrdom, as well as women’s victimization and public sacrifice. Andén-Papadopoulos (2013) explains how ‘recordings of the death of young woman Neda Agha-Soltan during a demonstration in Tehran on 20 June, 2009 are an illustrative point of reference: her final moments were captured by at least three bystanders with mobile phone cameras and swiftly spread across the global mediascape’ (Andén-Papadopoulos 2013:760). The acts of those witnessing this brutal action – recording, reconfiguring and distributing images – allowed them to offer public testimony of their grounded experience. The individual experiences of these witnesses contributed to a collective sentiment, as this image began to stand in for the shared experience of trauma (Zelizer 2002). In sum, ‘Neda became a public symbol of defiance; and the recordings of her death were strategically fed back into the political dynamic of the conflict itself, functioning to unite and revive the battered opposition to the Iranian government’ (Andén-Papadopoulos 2013:763).

The importance of what was done in Iran, using non-digital creativity, to inform people inside the country has not been fully recognized. As digital media begin to overshadow other forms of protest, we agree that:
Both the United States and Iran might do well to remember a lesson from recent history. In 1979, civil resistance shook a corrupt system to its core and ultimately led to an uprising that overthrew an unpopular regime. This was the most effective popular Revolution ever seen in Iran. Twitter did not yet exist.

(Lanzillo 2011:n.p.)

Transnational connections between national politics and the global stage
The Green Movement invoked symbolic references to national and religious histories in their struggle for internal legitimacy within Iran, but also strategically engaged transnational support through their use of icons and languages more familiar to a global community. The iconic ‘V’ and Neda visuals were accessible across linguistic barriers. Moreover, some of the posters and videos were circulated in English, and were designed to reach audiences beyond national boundaries.

Digital media regarding these particular protests were important to the global audience, particularly given the Iranian government’s restrictions on foreign media inside the country, as well as their tight control over their internal television and radio broadcast stations. Research emphasizing the role of media in the Green Movement tends to downplay the national efforts of the ‘green people’ (a term applied to those who support the Green Movement), who with ingenuity and persistence, under extremely dangerous conditions, enabled their perspective to be heard and seen on a global stage.

Conclusions
Just as the Green Movement in 2009 can be understood in relation to political dissension and transition in 1979, current events in Iran resonate with historical frustration with dominant political regimes. The aims of the 2009 strategies were not necessarily to overthrow the governing Islamic Republic, but rather to contest election results. Iran constitutes a complex community in transition, connected to the global stage through high access to digital media, yet subject to strict and strong government control and censorship. Subsequent protests in 2011 also faced government surveillance and restrictions to digital media use and access. Our exploration of this case allows us to consider how contemporary resistance might consider creative and complex communication strategies grounded in local practices.

The Green Movement’s 2009 strategies were most successful when engaging creatively with distribution, particularly with regard to engaged youth (Houshyar and Sarmadi 2014). Among those who hope for different political outcomes to future elections (Diba 2012), communication strategies need to be distinguished between those resonant with local communities and those reaching toward transnational audiences. The canvas of expression employed creative approaches beyond typical
screens and print, including signs on currency, buses and traditional foods, demonstrate the convergence of mediated approaches. Images inspired citizens within Iran differently than those outside of the country, depending on the strategies engaged. For those within the country, particular words, colours and symbols may invoke shared interpretations relevant to cultural interests. For transnational audiences, the use of English, the ‘V’ sign, and the projection of Neda as iconic female victim became relevant.

Instead of relying on narrow articulations of digital media as critical in building political resistance, we need to understand the importance of cultural context in the potential for collective strategies to mobilize against the abilities of government and other institutions to assert control. Moreover, communications needs to be seen as a convergent and complex set of strategies with the potential to be engaged in creative ways.

**Notes**

1 Mir-Hossein Mousavi Khameneh better known as Mir-Hossein Mousavi had served the government of Ali Khamenei (who is the current Supreme Leader of Iran) as Prime Minister. He is an Iranian reformist politician.


**References**


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