

Social media protest in Iran: Re-imagining the Iranian people

Samira Rajabi

Not long ago, few media consumers could truly name a time in which they witnessed a real death in the media. Of course, with mass media proliferation, most of the developed world has been exposed to some degree of reporting on war, conflict or political unrest in the evening news, on the cover of the international section of a newspaper, or in a news magazine. There are those iconic images that have historically allowed media users to visualize contexts of protest in the imaginative space of the mind, though the context of those protests might be quite far from their realm of understanding.

Recent technological changes and global events have shifted daily interaction with those spaces of protest, making them more personal, more intimate, and in many ways more memorable. Few people who witnessed the 2009 murder of Neda Agha-Soltan will soon forget what they saw. The image of her blood stained face and her captive eyes was graphic, visceral and moving. People saw her lying on the ground, dying as they helplessly watched. These witnesses were not the spectators in the street, or the men who frantically tried to save her. They were the YouTube audiences that clicked through social media posts to a powerful video of a woman, Neda, dying in the street.

Neda Agha-Soltan was one of thousands of protestors in the 2009 Iranian uprising that came about in response to the contested presiden-

tial election between Mir Houssein Mousavi and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. What became known as the Green Movement was a large scale uprising against an arguably unjust president and a hard-line regime. Peaceful protestors, who made careful references to Islam, in order to avoid condemnation from the government, were met with unexpected force and violence (Varzi, 2011). Neda was killed during these protests by the Iranian plainclothes police.

Neda's image online, in the midst of this political unrest, functioned as a pivotal moment in the movement because of an Iranian doctor and author walking behind her who tried in vain to save her while his friend videotaped the scene. That video captured hearts and minds while highlighting a unique way that the Internet takes up an image: making it and remaking it according to the logic of protestors. The video of Neda serves as a vivid symbol of the aching heart of a nation and all those bearing witness to its pain.

The video was a call to action, one that publics globally responded to. The original video of her death was seen over a million-and-a-half times (FEELTHELIGHT, 2009). That image was then re-made and re-mediated through YouTube tributes to her life, her beauty, her sacrifice, and her death. As the Iranian regime cracked down on physical forms of resistance, people moved to online spaces to express their grief, sorrow, and more importantly to protest not just the woeful fate of Neda, but of their entire country.

Stories of grief, stories of struggle, and expressions of hope

Immediately Neda's image was invoked as an angel, a symbol, an icon. The word "neda" means voice, and the protestors made her their voice. Her face, blood stained and dying, became a powerful



marker of the opposition. Just two days after her murder it was noted in *The New York Times* that, “the very public adulation of Ms. Agha-Soltan could create a religious symbol for the opposition and sap support for the government among the faithful who believe Islam abhors killing innocent civilians” (Fathi, 2009).

Within days tributes multiplied on YouTube from all sides of the world. Some were sanctioned by international advocacy agencies such as Amnesty International, while others displayed disparate diaspora communities striving desperately to show solidarity with Iranian protestors. In all of these videos we see the tools of social media being brought to bear on something more vital than a meme or the requisite cat video. These were stories of grief, stories of struggle, and expressions of hope for freedom through democracy.

Despite mainstream representations, Neda was not an innocent bystander; she was an educated protestor seeking change in her country (Kamalipour, 2010). However, with constant re-mediations of her image the truth of who Neda was became less important than who YouTube tribute makers believed her to be, and, perhaps more aptly, wanted her to be for them. Using tropes of gender and religion, protestors mobilized witnesses inside and outside of Iran through emotional appeals. Her beauty and gender turned her into a female martyr who reminded YouTube users of Mother Mary (Kamalipour ed., 2010).

There was a sense of hope in her death. Just as the Guadalupe was important to Mexico, Neda is important to Iran “not only because she is a supernatural mother, but also because she embodies their major political and religious aspirations” (Wolf, 1958). These devotional acts made clear that Neda was a complex and nuanced symbol of the collective history of a nation that has long been at the centre of international political

and cultural discussion.

Critics note that, while Neda is a powerful figure, her death, and, indeed, the Green Movement, did not substantially shift the political and religious dynamics in Iran that caused these uprisings in the first place. While it is true that there has been no systemic overthrow in Iran we can see shifts in the mediations of Iran and the narratives coming out of Iran. In 2012, a public execution was posted online by YouTube user “iran parast”. The graphic video has over 2.7 million views and ends with a plea to those living in “free countries” to use that power to help the people of Iran.

It is not difficult to argue that the image of Neda, the resonance that it left online and among Iranian publics, made videos of such graphic injustices seem more allowable. This is, of course, not



the work of the Internet and social media alone. We’ve seen progressive change arise as a result of multiple small scale resistances in everyday life. For example, graffiti in the streets of Iran has been studied as having a liberating effect on citizens.

Further, the ideological conflict has long been fought on women’s bodies, their lipstick becoming brighter and hejab being moved further back on their heads as forms of micro-resistance against a brutal regime. Each transgression provides space for further transgressions. Each act of micro-resistance leaves traces of itself thus cultivating a longitudinal protest that is almost imper-

ceptible in its articulations. Particularly interesting in the case of Iran is the way Iranian people seek to shirk the stories that are told in the dominant international and western media narratives about their country.

Making the invisible visible

Only certain kinds of images are acceptable in the cross-cultural exchange of ideas that so often intersects with understandings of race, ethnicity, religion, and gender. Neda made sense as a public icon: her image was largely Western, her beauty fit into conventions and standards recognized on a global scale. She was a likeable victim in that she fit a prevailing image of innocence, fragility, and attractiveness.

Despite this, online re-mediators of her image used her to retell a story of Iran, and to use her as an entry point to make marked, invisible Iranian bodies visible on a global scale. Suddenly, even othered bodies were made legible as suffering: dark bodies, bearded bodies, veiled bodies, conventional and unconventional bodies all suddenly had a space from which to speak.

Recently *The New York Times* featured an article about Iranian artist Newsha Tavakolian who gave up a 50,000 Euro photojournalism prize to cover what had been termed “the burnt generation” (Gonzalez, 2014). Tavakolian took umbrage to the notion that images of everyday Iranians need to be “sexy to outsiders” and gave back the prize when she was asked to reframe her images to fit the vision of what Iran should look like according to the foundation who funded the prize (ibid, 2014).

Tavakolian’s images are subtle and powerful, eerily depicting the contested, and complex realities of Iranian daily lives. The images with their captions deliver a testimony of Iranian people attempting to be seen on their own terms – terms Neda helped make clear. Tavakolian took to Facebook to defend her photos and her decision to step away from the prize and the central, pervasive, but often false image of Iranian reality.

She stated that the foundation’s “insistence on changing essential aspects of [her] work would have resulted in completely changing the nature of

[her] project from a subtle attempt to bring across the realities of life of [her] generation in Iran to a coarse and horrible clichéd view about Iran” (Tavakolian, 2014). The possibility of this resistance can be seen as an extension of the protests and tributes that erupted on YouTube in 2009.

The images of Neda’s death were spectacular and gruesome and the same can be said of the public hangings and other images of graphic violence that have been given life through social media. Though these images may serve to fuel the prevailing narratives of Iran as nothing more than an unjust regime, they do other work as well. These articulations online provided a baseline from which to re-tell the stories, re-shape the narratives according to a grassroots logic of the people, and shift understandings of collective memory and thus future events.

The images provided a space through which to say, this is our Iran, this is our voice. Couldry (2010) argues that voice, or “giving an account of oneself and what affects one’s life” is a central part of what it means to be human and the effective opportunity to have one’s voice heard and taken into account is a human good (p. vi). Central to having a voice is the recognition of that voice. Social media is a space in which voice can be recognized and thus articulated.

In pushing back against powerful depictions of Iran, Tavakolian leaves important residues behind, similar to YouTube storytellers online who re-mediated the story of Neda to fuel their protests, and women in the streets of Iran that use their faces as a canvas through which to fight a political battle. Expressions of unique narratives online in social media provide a framework through which voice can expand, grow, and resist.

In order to actualize these voices Internet users make careful use of modern social media technologies. These moments of protest, while perhaps slowly eating away at dominant structures, serve less to change the totality of political, social, and religious environments than to facilitate changing forms of practice. Banet-Weiser (2012) argues that this technology of the self is the set of practices that permits “individuals to effect ...a certain number of operations on their own bod-

ies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault in Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 55).

When examining these spaces of small-scale dissent, we bear witness to instances of “bottom-up resistance” where those who feel disenfranchised in some way attempt to regain control and interrupt dominant ideas of identity, nationhood, mourning, violence, gender, martyrdom or any other cultural construct that functions normatively (Raley, 2009, p. 2). Raley calls these *tactical users*, who use the media to foster micro-political action



that, while fleeting, operates productively in its instability. Instability, after all, opens up space in culture for contestation. Such movements seek small scale awareness and temporary disturbances of cultural norms, functioning through destructive creativity that is ambivalent and spontaneous.

It is in these moments of resistance to the Iranian narrative that we can see the true Iranian imaginary emerge. What is unique about social media protest for these publics is not the ways of articulating meaning. Instead, it is the instantaneity combined with the traces it leaves behind, like faded graffiti woven into a new piece of art.

Without the YouTube video of Neda and the way it was taken up by the public, the current mediations of public hangings online wouldn't be possible, micro-political gestures could not take hold in the way we see them online and in the

media. Even mainstream movies like Jon Stewart's *Rosewater* could not appropriately enter into the mainstream imagination. Users want to hear the stories of Iranians because of a fateful connection with one Iranian woman on YouTube in the middle of the Green Movement. ■

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Samira Rajabi is a doctoral candidate in Media Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She has her M.A. in International and Intercultural Communications from the University of Denver School of Mass Communications and the Josef Korbel School of International Studies. Her undergraduate degree is a B.S. in Entrepreneurship from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Her research focuses on representations and interventions to violence against women through the media as well as the use of online tools and social media in the wake of traumatic experiences. Using a strong focus on meaning making online, she interrogates multiple levels of trauma in diverse communities. She focuses on mediations and re-mediations of trauma as they relate to identity, race, ethnicity and gender. Samira has a strong grounding in feminist and gender studies as well as development as it relates to women. Her regional interests include Iran, the Middle East, as well as Central and East Africa.