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**The Iranian Uprisings and the Challenge of the New Media  
Politics and the Subversive Imagination**

**By Dr. Henry A. Giroux, PhD**  
**BlackCommentator.com Columnist**

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*[We welcome Dr. Henry A. Giroux, PhD, as the newest **BlackCommentator.com** Columnist.]*

As the uprisings in Iran illustrate, the new electronic technologies and social networks they have produced have transformed both the landscape of media production and reception, and the ability of state power to define the borders and boundaries of what constitutes the very nature of political engagement. Indeed, politics itself has been increasingly redefined by a screen culture and newly emergent public spaces of education and resistance embraced by students and other young people. [\[1\]](#) For example, nearly 75 percent of Iranians now own cell phones and are quite savvy in utilizing them. [\[2\]](#) Screen culture and its attendant electronic technologies have created a return to a politics in which many young people in Iran are not only forcefully asserting the power to act and express their criticisms and support of Mir Hussein Moussavi but are also willing to risk their lives in the face of attacks by thugs and state sponsored vigilante groups. Texts and images calling for "Death to the dictator" circulate in a wild zone of representation on the Internet, YouTube, and among Facebook and Twitter users, giving rise to a chorus of dissent and collective resistance that places many young people in danger and at the forefront of a massive political uprising.

Increasingly, reports are emerging in the press and other media outlets of a number of protesters being attacked or killed by government forces. In the face of massive arrests by the police and threats of execution from some government officials, public protest continues even, as Nazila Fathi reports in the *New York Times*, the government works "on many fronts to shield the outside world's view of the unrest, banning coverage of the demonstrations, arresting journalists, threatening bloggers and trying to block Web sites like Facebook and Twitter, which have become vital outlets for information about the rising confrontation here." [\[3\]](#)

It is impossible to comprehend the political nature of the existing protests in Iran (and recently in Moldova) without recognizing the centrality of the new visual media and new modes of social networking. Not only have these new mass-and image-based media - camcorders, cellular camera-phones, satellite television, digital recorders, and the Internet, to name a few - enacted a structural transformation of everyday life by fusing sophisticated electronic technologies with a ubiquitous screen culture; they have revolutionized the relationship between the specificity of an event and its public display by making events accessible almost instantly to a global audience.

The Internet, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook have reconstituted, especially among young people, how social relationships are constructed and how communication is produced, mediated, and received. They have also ushered in a new regime of visual imagery in which screen culture creates spectacular events just as much as they record them. Under such circumstances, state power becomes more porous and less controlled and its instability becomes evident as the Iranian government points to the United States and Canada for producing "deviant news sites." As if such charges can compete with images uploaded on YouTube of a young man bleeding to death as a result of an assault by government forces, his white shirt stained with blood, and bystanders holding his hand while he died. [\[4\]](#) Or for that matter, suppress images of militia members along with other identifying information about the police and other thugs attacking the protesters. The Internet and the new media outlets in this context provide new public sites of visibility for an unprecedented look into the workings of both state sponsored violence, massive unrest, and a politics of massive resistance that simply cannot be controlled by traditional forces of repression.

The pedagogical force of culture is now writ large within circuits of global transmission that defy the military power of the state while simultaneously reinforcing the state's reliance on military power to respond to the external threat and to control its own citizens. In Iran, the state sponsored war against democracy, with its requisite pedagogy of fear dominating every conceivable media outlet, creates the conditions for transforming a fundamentalist state into a more dangerous authoritarian state. Meanwhile, insurgents use digital video cameras to defy official power, cell phones to recruit members to battle occupying forces, and Twitter messages to challenge the doctrines of fear, militarism, and censorship.

The endless flashing of screen culture not only confronts those in and outside of Iran with the reality of state sponsored violence and corruption but also with the spread of new social networks of power and resistance among young people as an emerging condition of contemporary politics in Iran. Text messaging, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and the Internet have given rise to a reservoir of political energy that posits a new relationship between the new media technologies, politics and public life. These new media technologies and Websites have proved a powerful force in resisting dominant channels of censorship and militarism. But they have done more in that they have allowed an emerging generation of young people and students in Iran to narrate their political views, convictions, and voices through a screen culture that opposes the one-dimensional cultural apparatuses of certainty while rewriting the space of politics through new social networking sites and public spheres.

A spectacular flood of images produced by a subversive network of technologies that open up a cinematic politics of collective resistance and social justice now overrides Iran's official narratives of repression, totalitarianism, and orthodoxy—unleashing the wrath of a generation that hungers for a life in which matters of dignity, agency, and hope are aligned with democratic institutions that make them possible. Death and suffering are now inscribed in an order of politics and power that can no longer hide in

the shadows, pretending that there are no cracks in its body politic, or suppress the voices of a younger generation emboldened by their own courage and dreams of a more democratic future.

In this remarkable historical moment, a sea of courageous young people in Iran, are leading the way in instructing an older generation about a new form of politics in which mass and image-based media have become a distinctly powerful pedagogical force, reconfiguring the very nature of politics, cultural production, engagement, and resistance. Under such circumstances, this young generation of Iranian students, educators, artists, and citizens are developing a new set of theoretical tools and modes of collective resistance in which the educational force of the new media both records and challenges representations of state, police, and militia violence while becoming part of a broader struggle for democracy itself.

Any critical attempt to engage the courageous uprisings in Iran must take place within a broader notion of how the new media and electronic technologies can be used less as entertainment than as a tool of insurgency and opposition to state power. State power no longer has a hold on information, at least not the way it did before the emergence of the new media with its ability to reconfigure public exchange and social relations while constituting a new sphere of politics. The new media technologies are being used in Iran in ways that redefine the very conditions that make politics possible. Public spaces emerge in which data and technologies are employed to bypass government censors. The public and the private inform each other as personal discontent is translated into broader social issues. Global publics of opposition emerge through electronic circuits of power offering up wider spheres of exchange, dialogue, and resistance. For example, protesters from all over the world are producing proxy servers, "making their own computers available to Iranians," and fuelling worldwide outrage and protests by uploading on YouTube live videos exposing the "brutality of the regime's crackdown." [\[5\]](#)

Demonstrations of solidarity are emerging between the Iranian diaspora and students and other protesters within Iran as information, technological resources, and skills are exchanged through the Internet, cell phones, and other technologies and sites. The alienation felt by many young people in an utterly repressive and fundamentalist society is exacerbated within a government- and media-produced culture of fear, suggesting that the terror they face at home and abroad cannot be fought without surrendering one's sense of agency and social justice to a militarized state. And yet, as the technology of the media expands so do the sites for critical education, resistance, and collective struggle.

The uprising in Iran not only requires a new conception of politics, education, and society; it also raises significant questions about the new media and its centrality to democracy. Image-based technologies have redefined the relationship between the ethical, political, and aesthetic. While "the proximity is perhaps discomfiting to some, ... it is also the condition of any serious intervention" [\[6\]](#) into what it means to connect cultural politics to matters of political and social responsibility.

The rise of the new media and the conditions that have produced it do not sound the death knell of democracy as some have argued, but demand that we "begin to rethink democracy from within these conditions." [\[7\]](#) These brave Iranian youth are providing the world with a lesson in how the rest of us might construct a cultural politics based on social relations that enable individuals and social groups to rethink the crucial nature of what it means to know, engage civic courage, and assume a measure of social responsibility in a media-saturated global sphere. They are working out in real time

what it means to address how these new technologies might foster a democratic cultural politics that challenges religious fundamentalism, state censorship, militarism, and the cult of certainty.

Such a collective project requires a politics that is in the process of being invented, one that has to be attentive to the new realities of power, global social movements, and the promise of a planetary democracy. Whatever the outcome, the magnificent and brave uprising by the young people of Iran illustrates that they have legitimated once again a new register of both opposition and politics. What is at stake, in part, is a mode of resistance and educational practice that is redefining in the heat of the battle the ideologies and skills needed to critically understand the new visual and visualizing technologies not simply as new modes of communication, but as weapons in the struggle for expanding and deepening the ideals and possibilities of democratic public life and the supportive cultures vital to democracy's survival.

As these students and young people have demonstrated, it would be a mistake to simply align the new media exclusively with the forces of domination and commercialism as many do in the United States – with what Allen Feldman calls “total spectrum violence.” [8] The Iranian uprising, with its recognition of the image as a key force of social power, makes clear that cultural politics is now constituted by a plurality of sites of resistance and social struggle, offering up new ways for young people to conceptualize how the media might be used to create alternative public spheres that enable them to claim their own voices and challenge the dominant forces of oppression.

Theorists such as Thomas Keenan, Mark Poster, Douglas Kellner, and Jacques Derrida are right in suggesting that the new electronic technologies and media publics “remove restrictions on the horizon of possible communications” [9] and, in doing so, suggest new possibilities for engaging the new media as a democratic force both for critique and for positive intervention and change. The ongoing struggle in Iran, if examined closely, provides some resources for rethinking how the political is connected to particular understandings of the social; how distinctive modes of address are used to marshal specific and often dangerous narratives, memories, and histories; and how certain pedagogical practices are employed in mobilizing a range of affective investments around images of trauma, suffering, and collective struggles.

The images and messages coming out of Iran both demonstrate the courage of this generation of young people and others while also signifying new possibilities for redefining a global democratic politics. What the dictatorship in Iran is witnessing is not simply generational discontent or the power of networking and communication sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube but a much more dangerous lesson in which democracy implies an experience in which power is shared, dialogue is connected to involvement in the public sphere, hope means imagining the unimaginable, and collective action portends the outlines of a new understanding of power, freedom, and democracy.

*[This commentary was originally published in [CounterPunch](#).]*

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**The BlackCommentator Readers' Corner Blog**

**BlackCommentator.com** Guest Commentator, Henry A. Giroux holds the Global TV Network chair in English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University in Canada. Related work: Henry A. Giroux, [“The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence”](#) (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001). His most recent books include

["Take Back Higher Education"](#) (co-authored with Susan Searls Giroux, 2006), ["The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex"](#) (2007) and ["Against the Terror of Neoliberalism: Politics Beyond the Age of Greed"](#) (2008). His newest book, ["Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?"](#), will be published by Palgrave Mcmillan in 2009. Click [here](#) to contact Dr. Giroux.

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Notes:

[1] I take up the issue of screen culture and the challenge of the new media in Henry A. Giroux, [\*Beyond the Spectacle of Terrorism: Global Uncertainty and the Challenge of the New Media \(The Radical Imagination\)\*](#) (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).

[2] I want to thank Tony Kashani for these figures.

[3] Nazila Fathi, "Protesters Defy Iranian Efforts to Cloak Unrest," *New York Times* (June 18, 2009), p. A1.

[4] Brian Stelter and Brad Stone, "Stark Images of the Turmoil in Iran, Uploaded to the World on the Internet," *New York Times* (June 18, 2009), p. A14.

[5] Ibid., Stelter and Stone, "Stark Images of the Turmoil in Iran," p. A14.

[6] Thomas Keenan, "Mobilizing Shame," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (2004), p. 447. Keenan explores the relationship between ethics and responsibility in even greater detail in his *Fables of Responsibility* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).


[7] Jacques Derrida cited in Michael Peters, "The Promise of Politics and Pedagogy in Derrida," *Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies* (in press).


[8] Allen Feldman, "On the Actuarial Gaze: From 9/11 to Abu Ghraib," *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 2 (March 2005), p. 212.

[9] Jürgen Habermas, [\*The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason\*](#), (This link is to the Kindle edition - hardcover and paperback unavailable from Amazon.com) trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1987), p. 390.

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