

Democracy & Society

A PUBLICATION of the CENTER FOR DEMOCRACY and CIVIL SOCIETY

Volume 7, Issue 2

Democrats, Dictators, and Demonstrators Conference Issue

Iranian Political Unrest in Cyberspace

Hervé St-Louis¹

¹ Thanks to Dr. Thomas P. Keenan, Professor and Fellow of the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies, University of Calgary for his guidance and support in this project.

Introduction

A popular way of describing Iranian blogging is as a refuge for opponents and critics of the Islamic regime in Iran. In 2001, a young intrepid Iranian reporter left his home country to settle in Toronto, Canada where he began communicating to Iranians around the world by diffusing political messages denouncing the Iranian regime.² By posting instructions in Farsi a week after the events of September 11, 2001 on how to set up a blog,³ this blogger, Hossein Derakhshan became a mythical figure who taught Iranians how to use blogs and Cyberspace⁴ to foment a viable opposition to the Islamist and conservative regime in Tehran. Dubbed “the Father of Iranian Bloggers,”⁵ Derakhshan, according to various sources, helped make Farsi the tenth most widely used language in blogs, as of 2006.⁶ Thousands of Iranians answered his call and began expressing themselves in blogs. Government control over the Internet in Iran is sporadic, so Cyberspace became a viable expression forum featuring the real feelings of Iranians inside Iran.

This study will cover the history of Iranian blogging, generated both from within Iran and from the Iranian diaspora. Some blogs have sought to influence the situation in the country by diffusing information on the Iranian regime, while others have been aimed at empowering groups within Iranian society. This essay will ask if there was a critical junction at which both types of blogs and Cyberspace activities merged, allowing them to become substantive actors in the wider blogging culture. It will also examine the security imperatives of Iranian blogging before its interface with the dominant blogging culture in the summer of 2009. Moreover, this paper will consider whether the interfacing⁷ of Iranian blogging with the dominant blogging culture changed the preferred format of blogging to micro-blogging.⁸

² Nasrin Alavi, "Persian chat A huge and growing number of young Iranians are using weblogs to vent their views, in spite of the risks. And the heroes of cyberspace are increasingly the anti-heroes of the Islamic regime." *Financial Times*, November 5, 2005.

³ Blogs are the descendants of the traditional home page from the late 1990s and early 2000s. Blogs combine some of the personal journal aspect of some of those old Web sites, while facilitating the maintenance and allowing easy exchange of links and information.

⁴ This paper defines Cyberspace as the Internet inhabited and used by people. Cyberspace includes the Internet, but also overlapping networks such as that of the Blackberry, text messaging done through cellular telephones and other wireless forms of communications, such as the WiMAX network.

⁵ Nicholas Keung, "Blogging is the new revolution." *Toronto Star*, May 18, 2006.

⁶ Liora Hendelman-Baavur, "Promises and Perils of Weblogistan: Online Personal Journals and the Islamic Republic of Iran." *The Middle East Review of International Affairs* 2, (June 2007): 6.

⁷ Interfacing describes the process whereby the Iranian-centered blogosphere became part of the wider Cyberspace when human actors from Iran (bloggers) interacted with non-Iranian human actors (bloggers and observers).

⁸ Micro-blogs are platforms and blogs that purposely limit the amount of information that can be posted. For example, the micro-blogging platform Twitter limits the length of messages, prohibits the use of image or sound files in messages posted, and does not retain data past a certain timeframe.

The Internet in Iran was sponsored by the Iranian regime. According to then-doctoral student in political science Babak Rahimi, “Internet use in Iran was first promoted by the government to provide an alternative means of scientific and technological advancement during the troubled economic period that followed the Iran-Iraq War.”⁹ According to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, “The Islamic Republic was unwilling to forgo the benefits of the Internet in order to maintain tight control. For example, ISPs were allowed to operate without serious interference from the late 1990s until 2003.”¹⁰ But, state control of Iranian media eventually extended to the Internet. “In 2003, Iran became the first country to imprison a blogger for views expressed online, and at least 28 bloggers and online journalists have been imprisoned since.”¹¹

The Press Law of 1986 is the main tool for regulating media in Iran. This law prohibits specific topics and censors speech. It also prescribes codes of conduct for the media and sets objectives about how it must promote the views of the Iranian authorities. Following the 1997 election of President Mohammad Khatami, censorship laws were relaxed to shift “from a system that relies on restrictions as its main strategy”¹² to one that “occasionally [...] deal[s] tactically with sensitive and vital matters.”¹³ The “détente” led to a backlash from Iran’s parallel religious government with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei warning that “everyone must pay attention to the Red Line.”¹⁴ In April 2000, the Press Law was amended to include electronic publications broadly defined as “publications regularly published under a permanent name, specific date and serial number ... on different subjects such as news, commentary, as well as social, political, economic, agricultural, cultural, religious, scientific, technical, military, sports, artistic matters, etc., via electronic vehicles.”¹⁵ Publications, such as blogs that are not registered under the Press law are subject to general laws.¹⁶

Understanding the telecommunication infrastructure of Iran helps to understand the framework under

⁹ Rahimi, "Cyberdissent," 2.

¹⁰ Iran Human Rights Documentation Center. *Ctrl + Alt + Delete*, 8.

¹¹ Nathan C Martin, "Political Dispatches with Personal Twists: How Iranian Blogs Discuss Social Movements." (master's thesis, University of Kansas, 2007), 25.

¹² Iran Human Rights Documentation Center. *Ctrl + Alt + Delete*, 8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵ OpenNet initiative. *Internet Filtering in Iran* (Cambridge, MA: OpenNet initiative, 2009) 12. (see endnotes)

¹⁶ OpenNet initiative. *Internet Filtering in Iran*, 5.

which blogging and Internet operate in Iran. The Iranian government requires that Internet service providers (ISP) “use filtration technology, [...] monitor and record Internet use of their customers.”¹⁷ ISPs are also required to “remove all anti-government and all anti-Islamic websites [sic] from their servers.”¹⁸ Because all Internet traffic in Iran is routed “through the state-controlled telecommunications infrastructure of the Telecommunication Company of Iran (TCI),”¹⁹ the author of the OpenNet Initiative researching Internet filtering in Iran argued that “[t]he architecture of the Iranian Internet is particularly conducive to widespread surveillance.”²⁰ Reports indicate that Germany’s Siemens and Finland’s Nokia have sold Iran equipment for monitoring and tracking Internet traffic.²¹

Internet filtering in Iran targets both “immoral contents” such as sexually explicit material and political material such as information from human rights organizations, critics from opponents of the regime and opposition parties.²² “In a study conducted in the fall of 2008, OpenNet found that “[a] majority of the blogs that were blocked were associated with secular politics and reformist viewpoints.”²³ The research firm also reported that before the 2009 election, more Farsi-language material was blocked than English-language material. For example, the New York Times was blocked on and off, while the English version of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was not blocked until June 2009. The Persian service of the BBC, on the other hand, has been blocked since its January 2009 launch. Similarly, the Farsi-language news and social network Web site Balatarin.com has been blocked since 2007 despite protests from users in Iran.²⁴ Websites of religious minorities in Iran, such as the Kurds, are also blocked.²⁵

Iranian Blogging

Despite the fact that many Iran-based media outlets are edited and controlled by the Iranian regime²⁶ cyberspace and blogs have served as mediums through which dissidents diffuse information on the

¹⁷ Iran Human Rights Documentation Center. *Ctrl + Alt + Delete*, 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁹ OpenNet initiative. *Internet Filtering in Iran*, 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

²² *Ibid.*, 7.

²³ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁶ Tine Lewis, *Iran: Telecoms, Mobile and Broadband 8th Edition*. (Bucketty, NSW: Paul Budde Communication Pty Ltd, 2009), 1.

regime.²⁷ It can be argued that, although Iran's blogging culture existed and was well constituted before events of the 2009 Iranian presidential elections, its influence rose when it interfaced with the dominant Cyberspace culture connected to the Western world, in particular, the English-speaking world. As a result of the 2009 events, blogging in Iran has been perceived as an activity centered on micro-blogging platforms like Twitter and social networks like Facebook and YouTube. Based on accounts from non-Iranian media, blogging sprung up in Iran and suddenly was compatible with the interface used outside Iran to inform non-Iranians about the political situation in that polity. This transformation from blogging, which focused purely on disseminating information to Iranians inside and outside Iran to addressing non-Iranians in languages other than Farsi, did not happen overnight.

Iranian blogs are not uniform. Blogs originating from inside Iran are different than those generated from the Iranian diaspora, specifically communities based in North America and the United Kingdom. Within the latter category, two subgroups of bloggers have been identified: The first consists of older established immigrants in Iran who left during or just after the 1979 revolution, while the second is comprised of Iranian students pursuing advanced degrees in American schools. Anthropology doctoral candidate Janet Alexanian interviewed Iranian bloggers in Southern California and observed that bloggers from the first subgroup "desired the restoration of some form of constitutional monarchy in Iran, and many were opposed to the current government in Iran."²⁸ The second subgroup of Iranian bloggers tended to consider the first subgroup as being out of touch with modern Iran as they did not live through the hardships of the country following the 1979 Islamic revolution.²⁹

A common concern of both subgroups of Iranian bloggers outside of Iran has been to communicate and "sell" Iran to the Western world. Some blogs serve as virtual relay points for translating information about Iran from Farsi to English. Their goal is to make an attack on Iran by the West less probable.³⁰ To that effect, these blogs run by expatriates include images and videos of Iranians in daily activities. Often the Iranians portrayed in these images are young, wear modern clothes, and look like their counterparts in the West.³¹ To that extent, author Nasrin Alavi's book *Persian Chat* and the award-winning comic book series

²⁷ Charles Paul Freund, "Cyberfatwa." *Reason* 36 (2005): 15.

²⁸ Janet A. Alexanian, "Publicly Intimate Online: Iranian Web Logs in Southern California." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 1, (2006): 141.

²⁹ Alexanian, "Publicly Intimate Online," 141.

³⁰ Martin, "Political Dispatches with Personal Twists, 35.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

Persepolis turned into an animated film, created by Marjane Satrapi, served similar functions. The portrayal of Iranians as sharing similar values and cultures as the West serves to humanize Iranians to Westerners and possibly affect how policymakers in countries such as the United States, France, and the United Kingdom design their foreign policy towards Iran. Montreal-based Iranian blogger Nima Mohammad-Shahi wrote in an email interview, “I am hoping to show my audience that much of what they hear about Iran tells nothing about the true Iran. Iran is not a place full of radical Muslim terrorists, but normal people who care much, much more about how to have a decent job, make money and live in peace than about Great Satan or the Zionist Regime.”³²

British reporter Angus McDowall who lives in Tehran warned that, “while Iranian bloggers vividly portray a genuine part of Iranian society, they are a self-selecting sample that consist mostly of young, affluent, liberal-minded people who do not represent ‘the real’ Iran.”³³ He added, “What we rarely see in the English-language blogs are the views of a car-parts worker in the Khodro factory in Karaj, the unemployed young man who smokes heroin in a new, cheap housing estate on the edge of Semnan, or a housewife in Mashhad worrying whether her kids will get a place at the university. These people are as much ‘the real Iran’ as the bloggers, but their voices are less often heard.”³⁴

The range of topics featured in Iranian blogs has been the subject of several discussions. Blogs aimed at Western audiences are often political in nature, denouncing the Islamist regime and some of its actions while at the same time highlighting Iranian society to non-Iranians. Other blogs cater to an Iranian audience and provide an alternative source of information replacing traditional media.³⁵ Researchers John Kelly and Bruce Etling, of Harvard University’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society have produced a differentiated Iranian bloggers map among four broad subgroups. First, they identified a secular/reformist subgroup whose membership includes journalists and dissidents. According to the researchers, the secular faction within this subgroup contains many women and expatriates who focus on human rights and political prisoners. The reformist faction consists largely of Iranians living in Iran and dealing with contemporary political issues.³⁶

³² Ibid., 75.

³³ Ibid., 78.

³⁴ Ibid., 78.

³⁵ Rahimi, "Cyberdissent: The Internet in Revolutionary Iran," 7.

³⁶ John Kelly and Bruce Etling. *Mapping Iran's Online Public: Politics and Culture in the Persian Blogosphere*. Cambridge, MA: Berkman Center Research Publication, 2008) 12.

The second subgroup observed by Kelly and Etling is the conservative/religious cluster, which is religious in nature and promotes Shi'a Islam. One faction within this subgroup is aligned with conservative politics and focuses on current public affairs and politics. This faction supports the Islamist government but frequently criticizes its leaders. The second faction is rooted in the Twelver discourse and focuses on preaching Shi'a Islam and preparing the world for the return of al-Mahdi. The third subgroup identified by the study is comprised of religious youth, many of whom are students. The level of similarity among these bloggers, according to the researchers, suggests some degree of institutional coordination.³⁷ The researchers refer to this subgroup as the Persian poetry and literature subgroup because blogs in this category feature poetry and literature from Iran. The fourth and final subgroup identified by Kelly and Etling is the mixed network. The particularity of this group is the lack of a hierarchical structure of links to other blogs and Websites and the coverage of a variety of topics, such as sports and personal diaries. This subgroup also incorporates social networks used by Iranians.³⁸

Conclusion

The typical portrayal of Iranian blogging in Western media offers an idealized view of Iranian bloggers as political dissidents. This portrayal supported by factions of Iranian bloggers outside of Iran presents a perspective of Iranian society that is close to Western standards while being critical of the Islamist government of Iran. While the use of the Internet in Iran continues to grow, access and contents are controlled indirectly by the Iranian regime. Access to unfiltered content is a continuous issue for Iranians in Iran. Interfacing with Western standards helps Iranians communicate better with Western media, governments and the public. For example, moving away from Iran-specific blogs to a micro-blogging platform like Twitter, combining elements of blogs and social networks, reduces the technical complexity of the interfacing process.

³⁷ Kelly, *Mapping Iran's Online Public*, 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 12