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Weblogistan: a new path to self-expression in Iran

by Sepideh Parsa

While official US-Iranian relations continue to be at a low point, American pop culture remains surprisingly popular with the Iranian population itself.

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation has therefore asked researcher Sepideh Parsa to provide a sketch of the vibrant Iranian blogosphere. While "Weblogistan" is partially censored, it nonetheless offers a rare glimpse of the Iranian people's interests and desires.

More importantly, Weblogistan offers the disenfranchised groups the opportunity to practice their right of free speech. The extent to which this is done is truly promising for the future of Iran.

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My weblog is an opportunity for me to be heard...a free microphone that doesn't need speakers...a blank page...Sometimes I stretch out on this page in the nude...now and again I hide behind it. Occasionally I dance on it...Once in a while I tear it up...and from time to time I draw a picture of my childhood on it...I think...I live...I weblog...therefore I...exist. [1]

In recent years the blogosphere in the Middle East has experienced significant growth. Weblogs have become a primary medium for dissidence against the autocratic regime with its state-controlled media. Iran is one of the countries with the strictest censorship policy in the Middle East. Thus, weblogs offer Iranians the only platform to peacefully exchange their policy thoughts, emotions and opinions by overcoming the boundaries of gender and social class that have been imposed by the government. Hence, the Iranian people can enjoy such democratic pillars as freedom of speech and self-determination albeit to a limited extent.

Having surveyed approximately one hundred weblogs the author has chosen to center her research on the three most discussed topics by concentrating on 20 weblogs.

- First, this paper focuses on Iranian blogs that look into (American-) pop culture and its relevance for society's rejection of the regime and its desire for democratic rights.
- This is followed by a brief overview of how the Iranian blogosphere perceives the conflict between the Western world and Iran regarding its nuclear weapons policy.
- The last part deals with the importance of weblogs for Iranian women in their fight for human rights and a democratic movement in general.

Internet access in Iran

Before focusing on the content of these weblogs, it is necessary to reflect on media regulation and Internet censorship in Iran in general to understand the rising significance that these "online diaries" have for a country, where social behaviour, appearance and private lives are dictated and controlled by the government.

The Internet in Iran has experienced the most remarkable growth of all countries in the Middle East. Between 2000 and 2007, the number of users in Iran has increased from 250,000 to 18 Million. Iranians account for 53.7% of the total 33,5 million Internet users in this region.[2] In 2007, Iran had more than 6000 Internet hosts [3] as well as over 650 Internet Service Providers (ISP), which now are confronted with regulations that have been ordered by the *Ministry of Communications and Information*.

Although the Internet is regarded as a product of Western decadence, the regime has not been able to forgo the advantages that this medium offers. More than that, it has started to participate in cyberspace not just by using this instrument as a mouthpiece for its own

ideological interests but also by jumping on the weblog bandwagon. None less than President Ahmadinejad himself maintains a blog.[4]

Media regulation and Internet filtering

Article 24 of the Iranian constitution says that publications and the press are protected by the freedom of speech as long as they do not question the principles of Islam.[5] Although the Press Law views the task of the press as “[...] to enlighten public opinion and to increase the level of their knowledge [...]”[6], publications are supervised. Publications that concern Islamic principles and codes or insult the revolutionary leader or any other religious authority are strictly forbidden.[7] The Supreme *National Security Council* is responsible for monitoring the media. Each week journalists receive a new list of censored issues that cannot be covered.[8] Over the past years, more than a hundred newspapers have been shut down and many journalists have been arrested and imprisoned.[9] For this reason many journalists have fled into cyberspace.

However, the Internet has also given the Iranian population at large the opportunity to communicate with others and to exchange thoughts, perspectives and information openly. This kind of interaction would be impossible in Iran under existing conditions. Since there is no specific law that regulates Internet content, the Press Law is being applied to fill the void. In 2004, the chief of the judiciary announced that Iran was about to create a bill that aimed to define cybercrimes declaring that “[...] anyone who disseminates information aimed at disturbing the public mind through computer systems [...]”[10] would be punished. As a start, the government demanded in 2001 that all ISPs must apply filtering systems in order to eliminate every site that could harm the principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran.[11] This means that there are not just Internet sites within Iran that are being blocked, but also sites from outside – particularly Western media – which the regime does not want to influence the Iranian people. In 2005, it admitted that the regime was using a filtering system, called SmartFilter, that had been developed by the U.S. company Secure Computing. Secure Computing has denied any cooperation arguing that Iran was using an illegal version of the system.[12] A test that was run by the *OpenNet Initiative* in December 2005 showed that 31% out of the 2,025 tested pages had been filtered. Furthermore, the test demonstrated that pages that were dealing with sex (100%), politics (98%), religious and social topics (96%), opposition (40%), as well as 15% of the active weblogs were massively blocked.

In addition to all these measures, the *Ministry of Communications and Information* released an order on October 11, 2006, that forces ISPs to cut down the speed of their services to 128 kilobytes in order to make it more difficult for users to consume Western culture through downloads.[13]

The rise of Weblogs in Iran

After the government started to tighten its general media control, journalists faced the threat of persecution. Many started to turn to the Internet to explore opportunities

for free expression. Hossein Derakhshan, who used to work for an Iranian newspaper but is currently living in Canada, effectively introduced the blogosphere to the Iranian population. In 2001, he published online instructions on how to create a weblog in Persian language[14], which basically marks the beginning of the Iranian blogosphere, better known as “Weblogistan”.

According to 2005 Blog Herald estimates, there are now around 700,000 weblogs in Iran, of which 40,000 to 110,000 are supposedly active[15] (although most sources refer to a survey by the *NITLE Weblog Census* in 2004 that showed that there were about 64.000 Persian weblogs). Consequently it is no surprise that Farsi belongs to the top ten of the most commonly used languages in the blogosphere according to Technorati. [16] This is rather impressive considering that Farsi is mainly spoken in Iran.

These high numbers can arguably be traced to the strict censorship that is strangling the country’s media. Given that Weblogistan is one of the safest spaces for the Iranian population to communicate freely it is one of the few platforms that can compensate for the loss of free speech in the country. The *OpenNet Initiative*, after testing a hundreds of weblogs, pointed out that mostly individual weblogs were blocked but not blogging domains, which would be more effective for the government. Derakhshan explained in an interview that he gave to the *Elektronische Reporter* that the existence of weblogs in Iran is guaranteed, since there are many of them which are completely religious and pro-government. In fact, there are clergy schools in which students are taught how to create their own blogs.[17] Moreover, the *Office for the Promotion of Religious Weblogs* introduced the first class about blogging in the Holy City of Qom in October 2005.[18] In Derakhshan’s opinion, weblogs in particular are “iranianized” and are not viewed as a Western threat, since the religious leadership of the country is exploiting them for their own interests.

The Iranian blogger scene

Next to the religious groups that have embraced the “online diaries” in which they speak mostly about religious and ideological issues, there is another broad blogger scene in Iran. Many bloggers in Iran are actually journalists contributing to political weblogs thereby circumventing censorship.[19] However, this group does not necessarily constitute the majority of bloggers.

Instead it can be assumed that many bloggers are the “children of the revolution.” According to Saeid Golkar, in 2005, 91% of Iranian bloggers were between 13-30 years old. This is hardly surprising given that about 70% of the Iranian population is under the age of 30. More importantly 24% of the blogs were written by female authors (and 74% of the by male).[20] This is an encouraging figure showing that Iranian women are not shy to seize the freedoms that are available to them.

It is significant that the Iranian population is not just young, but also well-educated and extremely familiar with the Internet. One of the guidelines of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 was to offer higher education to the whole country. According to Nasrin Alavi

“[...] literacy rates for young men and women stand well over 90%, even in rural areas. Notably, more than half of those graduating from university in Iran today are women.”[21] The more the regime tries to prevent the population from acquainting themselves with Western culture, the more they try to consume what is forbidden. [22] Weblogs especially give youth, women and intellectuals—groups notoriously silenced in Iran—a chance of expressing themselves and participating in realms that would usually ignore their voices.

Weblogs – a safe space

First, it has to be said that most of the weblogs viewed in researching this paper do not deal solely with one topic but either subdivided in different categories or the author just posts about any kind of issue that is of interest to him. This is understandable in view of the multitude of themes that are censored in Iran. As a whole, the Iranian blogosphere serves as a refuge from the interferences of the regime into personal life.

By observing the Iranian blogosphere it becomes apparent that the cyber world is not just used as a safe space to reflect on politics and the Iranian system. Most bloggers simply talk about their everyday lives, their fears, love, their desire for freedom and a different life. At the same time, many weblogs are used to consume, explore and discuss arts and pop-culture in the virtual space. According to a survey that was carried out by the *Middle Eastern Review of International Affairs*, 29% of the weblogs deal with society, family and life; 19 % with history, culture and art; 17% with the Internet, computers and technology, and 13% of them with personal issues.[23] According to Derakhshan, although at first glance most of these weblogs do not have a political impact, they still have political aspects. Even when bloggers just write about their lives or interests, they are already challenging the government’s control over their lives. This means that simple topics become automatically politicised. Should Iranians chose to share these thoughts outside of their cyberspace they would be threatened by severe consequences.

The medium empowers Iranian society to participate in a democratic world - even though it is a virtual one. It is a place where they can reveal their personalities without being worried about cultural and social constraints. Amir-Ebrahimi argues that, “The act of writing a weblog in the universal, yet semi-private space of the internet, helps them to discover, reconstruct or crystallize their ‘true’ selves in virtual public spaces. In the absence of a body, these new ‘bodyless-selves’ enter a new world and form new communities which are restricted and controlled in their real physical spaces”. [24]

Consequently, blogging allows Iranians to overcome the barriers of social class and gender segregation that have been imposed on them since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Open interaction between the sexes is almost unthinkable, but even fostering relationships between individuals of different social classes often seems to be challenging, since class differences are usually determined geographically. [25]

There are even some weblogs written by homosexuals, like *Hamzaad*. Weblogs offer this highly persecuted and secretive community a chance to express parts of their sexu-

ality by communicating with like-minded people, who would never be able to come out publicly in the country. The possibility of writing under pseudonyms and the use of free proxy servers enable bloggers to protect themselves to some degree.[26]

For the past 28 years, the Iranian regime has tried hard to cleanse the country of any kind of Western or democratic movements. Today, Iranian society's desire for freedom, self-expression and Western culture seems to be more intense than ever. The fact that people from all walks of life exchange thoughts and opinions about topics that have been censored and together enjoy rights that are part of Western core values (in the virtual space), clearly shows that there is a liberating movement in Iranian society that flies in the face of the government ideology.

Pop culture in Iranian weblogs

Looking at the Iranian blogosphere, it is striking that many weblogs simply deal with areas that shape pop culture, especially American pop culture. At first, this might not seem significant, but considering that Iran is a country with strict censorship, where every kind of Western influence is viewed as poisoning the society and its Islamic principles, this aspect appears in a different light. Although the government tries to shield Iranians from Western culture, people still manage to get access to music, movies, plays, art, books and magazines. The black market in Iran offers a variety of pirate copies that are sold inexpensively. According to Alavi, "DVDs of the latest blockbusters from America are sold clandestinely all over the place and are often available in Iran long before they have their European premieres." [27] The black market provides enough material to be discussed extensively on the weblogs. While monitoring blogs like *weblog.hamidreza.com*, *raincoat.weblogspot.com* or *sabadaydreaming.weblogspot.com*, it is noticeable that the authors analyze and discuss passionately "The Lives of Others", "The Departed" or "The Dixie Chicks: Shut Up and Sing" for instance, focusing on what would be considered taboo subjects in their non virtual environment. After the Islamic Revolution, movie theatres were shut down for years for making Western culture too appealing. In view of this, having access to American movies is of particular value.

As much as movies are discussed on weblogs, so are pop music, books and magazines. The Iranian blogosphere is not just a platform for communication but also a download source that offers a multitude of Western media samples.[28] After Khomeini established his regime, it censored music. Instead, the regime only legalized war songs and instrumental music.[29] This action ended the careers of talented musicians in Iran. Many of them had to leave the country in order to pursue their profession.[30] Nevertheless, pop music managed to find its way back to Iran. However, in December 2005, President Ahmadinejad declared that Western music had to be banned from Iranian radio and TV stations since its influence was intoxicating the country.[31] Nonetheless, these rules do not prevent the Iranian society from rebellion by using the blogosphere to download and discuss the latest western "imports". For example, the author of the weblog *alireza04.blogspot.com* shares on his blog popular dance and music videos. The

weblog *blog.salehoffline.com* provides its readers with a set of movie recommendations as well as music links. Music videos, song lyrics and movies encourage the society to reflect on the social circumstances that are imposed upon them. The author of *psychooo.persianblog.com* states that “Marilyn Manson says: ‘I was created to show the wickedness of the people, as through my appearance I reveal the true face of humanity.’ What about us? What do we reveal with our appearances?”[32]

Unlike the way it is often presented in Western media, Iranians readily welcome and enjoy American culture. One blogger, for instance, says “I watch Friends TV series these days [...], I like the overall sitcom. It makes me familiar to American society.”[33] The American Journalist Steven Knipp from the Washington Post visited Iran in 2006 and reported that he was “[...] overwhelmed by the pro-Americanism of the people [...]” and that “[...] Iranians are avid fans of America: its culture, films, music, its open, free-wheeling society”. [34] According to Alavi, surveys by the *National Institute for Research Studies and Opinion Polls* and the *Iranian News Agency* showed that in 2002 64.5% of Iranians were in favour of talks between the US and Iran, and only 26.1% thought that America’s policy on Iran was wrong.[35] This mindset is reflected in the Iranian blogosphere. It seems that Iranians obsessively want what their government rejects and that they have strong opinions about Iranian and American relations.

From some political posts, it becomes clear that there is a general fear that America might attack Iran regarding its nuclear weapons policy. The authors of *mithras.org* and *iraniandiaries.weblogspot.com* both share the opinion that no matter how, this conflict has to be resolved without the population being hurt. Iranian bloggers are afraid that the West does not draw a distinction between the government and its people. The author of *iraniandiaries.blogspot.com* appeals to the West by saying “I am writing to a world who reads these lines: I, as an Iranian - a 27-year-old boy who is not satisfied with the current government of Iran and seeks a way to have a better living, perhaps in a foreign country—with all of confictions in today Iran, can’t tolerate another invasion to my mother land. I don’t want to see my Iran destroyed under bombs and missiles, and people died or injured or lost their families or homes, in a war between Iranian government and USA government in which only innocent people would be hurt.”

On the other hand, there are weblogs like *rodmania.com* or *amshaspands.blogspot.com* acknowledge U.S. fears of religious fundamentalists after the attacks of 9/11. However, the United States also has to understand the worries of Iranians considering Israel’s possession of the atomic bomb. At the same time, they argue that in view of the NIE report that was released in December 2007, that America cannot rely on the actions and words of the Iranian government. On the contrary, the author of *scarecrew.blogspot.com* posts that in his opinion the Iranian government refuses to negotiate in a power play that keeps them from looking like the losers of the game. The author of *energypak.blogfa.com* questions on the other hand, why the West wants to take away Iran’s right to produce nuclear energy, if other countries like Israel or North Korea are in possession of this power. Further he points out, that the West has often tried to intervene in Iranian politics regarding the American coup of the democratic Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry for

instance. Therefore, the West would have to understand that Iran wants to be in control of their own affairs.

In the blogosphere, it appears that the Iranian people reject their government's policy and want their voices to be heard. They are ready to show their displeasure towards the regime by either exploring Western culture or taking a daring stance in political affairs.

Women blogging

Blogs have become of special importance for women in Iran. The number of women participating in the blogosphere is rising. To understand the meaning of weblogs for female Iranians, it is necessary to take a look at the general situation of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran, which sometimes appears to be contradictory.

During the pre-revolutionary Shah-era, women enjoyed a rather westernized lifestyle with almost no restrictions on their freedom and rights. With the establishment of the Islamic Republic, this lifestyle was banned and the veil was dictated as a symbol of resistance to Western values and as a way to lower their gaze.[36] Veiling was particularly supported by Islamic feminists who assumed that this way they would be treated on equal terms with men. But today feminists are among those who oppose forced veiling.[37] That is probably why women have started to gradually show their hair, and are wearing make-up and tight, shorter clothes. It has become a way to rebel against the regime's power to dictate their look and regain an amount of self-determination.

The regime continues to regulate the behavior, appearance and activities of women by attempting to limit them to domestic tasks. However, the government fails to succeed in completing its goals, since women have always occupied public space and academia and even some political positions.[38] According to Alavi, "A third of all doctors, 60% of civil servants and 80% of all teachers in Iran are women. Some people believe the regime is immune to change, but many others, especially women, are experts at finding ways round the constraints of the patriarchal system".[39] As mentioned before, Iranian women have been well-educated for over a hundred years. They are aware of the rights that are given in a democratic system since they have been fighting for them "[...] from the pro-democratic Constitutional Revolution of 1906 to the egalitarian movement that overthrew the Shah of Iran." [40] Nonetheless they remain stripped of their basic human rights. The author of *golku.blogspot.com* points out "[...] We are no different from the free men and women of the world [...] We know how to think, how to educate ourselves how to work hard and improve ourselves. If we just had free choice [...]". According to Nobel Peace Prize winner and lawyer, Shirin Ebadi, women in Iran are terrorized and this is due to the patriarchal character of the system. According to her, a dynamic interpretation of Islam would accept women's rights, democracy and human rights.[41] Women are judged for "crimes" on a much stricter level and even face punishments like stoning. The options for women in Iran to file for a divorce, for instance, are enormously limited compared to those of men. But at the same time some basic democratic rights, such as voting at the age of 16, are granted to

them. The discrepancy of this system has become apparent and Iranian women are revealing their discontent by forming political groups and using weblogs as a tool to fight oppression and express their resentment.

Many of the weblogs observed for this paper focus on current arrests and measures taken by the government to push back women's attempts to protest. The authors of *ladysun.wordpress.com* as well as *parastood.com* report about arrests of politically active women, who took part in the *One Million Signatures Campaign* – a peaceful rally to collect one million signatures against gender discrimination. These bloggers point out their pride for activist women, who do not fear the state's punishment and are willing to give up their "freedom" for having one moment of self-expression. This opinion is also shared on *ordper.weblogspot.com*, where the author emphasizes that Iranian women struggle for their rights regardless of the consequences. In another post she reports about the most recent restriction that she has observed. "Women have been banned from watching football in the stadiums, women have been banned from smoking hubble-bubble in traditional restaurants, women have been arrested because of not observing Islamic dress codes. But I couldn't imagine this one, it says: "with regards; we cannot give service to ladies after 3 P.M. Karimkhan coffeeshouse."

Like some other bloggers the author of *jadi.civilblog.org* expresses her displeasure about a recent "operation against boots over trousers" by adding pictures showing the revolutionary guards arresting women for wearing jeans in their boots. The blog *anar-anar.livejournal.com* also mentions this incident and argues that it seems like the government wants to distract its citizens from the problems Iran has on an international level. Indeed, it could be a way of unsettling the society, by keeping them worried about their domestic situation so they do not question Iran's foreign policy. It could be argued that resistance against the system - no matter if in everyday life or in the virtual space - may be strongest among women. The biggest benefit for women, who are the victims of considerably more severe controls than men in Iran, is probably to inspire more women to spread the notion of human rights.

Women in Iran have been "condemned" to represent the values of a system through their appearances and behaviour but they have found ways to revolt against the regime and to regain at least a limited access to some democratic qualities.

Conclusion

In today's Iran, freedom of speech had endured drastical limitations. The Iranian government continues to radically push back any kind of Western influence that could possibly sweep its country and question its ideology. Previously mentioned research has explained, how the Iranian regime attempts to silence the Iranian people by not just controlling the media and censoring topics, but also by systematically filtering the Internet. These circumstances eventually prompted journalists who were not arrested to turn to weblogs to voice their views. However, it is not just journalists who have discovered the advantages of a weblog, but also more and more religious leaders are using the weblog to teach and spread their ideology.

Most Iranian bloggers belong to the younger generation, since the majority of Iran's population is under the age of 30 and has an extremely high literacy level. This group is eager to familiarize itself with Western, particularly American culture by absorbing and discussing everything from movies, music, magazines to technology and politics taking clear stances when it comes to U.S.-Iran relations. At the same time, they use weblogs as a platform to exchange their thoughts and opinions about topics of everyday life which they cannot discuss openly in their real social spaces. Therefore, it can be argued that weblogs are not just an information source, but provide Iranians with a forum to practice and push for democratic progress - even if it is "only" in virtual space.

Those who probably push hardest for such a movement are Iranian women. They suffer under the highest deprivation of human rights with their behaviour, appearances and activities completely being controlled by the government. They consequently are not just politically active but keep participating in the blogosphere trying to broaden their freedom of action. Iranian people have proved that they do not fear the punishment of their government and that they have found ways to overcome restrictions imposed by their regime. Democratic influences are nothing new to those who grew up in the Shah-era, but even the "children of the revolution" have accomplished to familiarize themselves with democratic values and desire to be treated as individuals with the right of self-expression and self-determination.

Nevertheless, the regime is able to observe the blogosphere and imposes restrictions. Free access to information is fundamental for international understanding and free media can be used as tool for spreading democracy. Many Western countries have already started to support not just Iran but also countries, where media is subjected to limitations by providing them with proxy servers or software to avoid filtering. Countries like Iran would benefit from Western know-how that would show them ways to protect themselves from the regimes interferences. *Reporters without Borders* are already trying organize support for bloggers in countries where a severe censorship exists.[42] However, Western governments would have to make sure, that the technological or financial support that they would be willing to offer would actually be received by the blogosphere. But this kind of support could be a way to expose societies, that are living under autocratic regimes to democratic principles and foster an already existing democratic movement.

Footnotes

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