MERIA

PROMISES AND PERILS OF WEBLOGISTAN: ONLINE PERSONAL JOURNALS AND THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

Liora Hendelman-Baavur*

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iranian printed and broadcast media has been strongly controlled by the state. However, the state's authority has been compromised due to online publishing and the free flow of information, especially through "Weblogistan"— the Iranian cyber-sphere of online self-publishing journals. This has generated much concern among the Islamic Republic authorities. Along with satellite television and mobile phones, weblogs have irretrievably changed the way people in the entire Middle East interact with one another and with the rest of the world. The Islamic Republic of Iran's ways of coping with challenges posed by the internet in general and weblogs in particular are especially intriguing, considering that the most famous blogger in the country is the current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

When three students—Salman Jariri, Hossein Derakhshan, and Nima Afshar Naderi—published the first three Iranian weblogs (or blogs) in late 2001, they were not aware that this was actually the birth of Weblogistan. Two years later, in 2003, Iranian Weblogistan was the fastest growing cyber-sphere in the Middle East, and it became a prominent feature in defining the new global phenomenon of online communities. Estimates for 2006 rank Iran ninth in the world for the number of weblogs, and Persian is among the top ten languages in terms of posting volume.[1] The Persian Weblog Service Provider (WSP) reports hosting over 180,000 registered weblogs, and the WSP Blogfa records traffic of over two million visitors a day.[2] According to Mahdi Boutorabi, managing director of PersianBlog, their service hosts the largest Iranian online community, with over 670,000 listed users.[3]

This paper tracks major characteristics of Iranian Weblogistan, points to the challenges it has posed to the Islamic Republic of Iran, and assesses ways in which the authorities have confronted them thus far.[4] It is important to note that from the outset, the bulk of internet challenges the Islamic Republic is facing (cyber-crimes, sedition, disinformation and imbalanced reporting, harassment, defamatory, hateful, obscene and immoral content, and other aspects to be discussed further) are not at all unique to the Iranian case and could apply to other countries as well. In setting up an advanced telecommunications infrastructure, each state chooses its own strategy for managing new information and communications technology. Yet the loss of the stranglehold over the flow of information reaching its populace and the emergence of an uncontrolled public sphere, such as Weblogistan, pose additional challenges for regimes in China, Egypt, North Korea, Syria, Tunisia, and Iran—which all appear on the Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) list of the "15 enemies of the Internet."[5]

WHAT IS A WEBLOG?

The term "weblog" (or blog for short) was scarcely familiar prior to 1999. Yet since then, weblogs have become the building blocks of one of the most vibrant virtual communities.[6] According to Nasrin Alavi, a weblog is "a kind of diary or journal posted on the internet."[7] Alireza Doostdar defines a weblog as "a website consisting of regularly updated writings arranged in reverse chronological order, usually by a single author."[8] A more complex definition is offered by Erin Simmons, who defines it as "a hyperlink-driven site containing a mixture of hyperlinks, commentary, personal thoughts and essays."[9] Dan Gilmore identifies a chain of online communications (email lists, forums, chat rooms, news groups, etc.) and categorizes weblogs somewhere in between the web and emails. He emphasizes that blogs also "link to other websites and weblog postings and many [bloggers] allow readers to comment on the original posts, thereby allowing audience discussions."[10]

In its April 2007 *State of the Live Web* updated quarterly report, the Technorati search engine tracked over 70 million weblogs. It further estimated that approximately 120,000 new weblogs are created everyday.[11] Notwithstanding these high figures, weblogs are also abandoned at the same rate that they are created. Some commentators even contend that the life expectancy of an average weblog equals that of a fruit fly.[12] The ultra-rapid growth of this virtual global village—known by now as the blogosphere, blogtopia, blogomania, blogalization, and Weblogistan—make the process of tracking weblogs, especially those that are active, a highly challenging endeavor.[13] Although

weblogs tend to share a basic format—a template, a headline, an archive arranged in reverse chronological order, blogrolls, and so forth—the dynamic evolution of this new medium has presented new methodological difficulties for research and typology. The implementation of advanced blogging tools, which improve both managing and presentation features, have already initiated the emergence of different types of weblogs (photo, video, and life weblogs, for example). In turn, online communication patterns are also being altered. As the blogosphere continues to flourish and evolve, the definition of what exactly constitutes a weblog has also become more complicated. Many personal websites have adopted weblog applications or are produced with weblogging software, thus it is difficult to discern them from true weblogs.

THE WEBLOGISTAN FRONTIER

Exploring the relationship between technology and online behavior, Quentin Jones suggests that the community's cyberspace is a socially produced "virtual settlement." Drawing on archaeological methodology and practices, Jones identifies four preliminary characteristics of the virtual settlement: interactivity, a variety of communicators, sustained membership, and a virtual common public space. Jones further stipulates that a virtual settlement is "symbolically delineated by topic of interest within which a significant proportion of interrelated computer-mediated communications occur."[14] Referring specifically to the blogosphere, Steve Fox defines it as "the new imagined community," inspired by Benedict Anderson's well known book, which focuses on the creation and the sustainability of the modern nation.[15]

Identifying the cyber-sphere as a metropolis, Michael Hauben observes the developing sense of responsibility shared by what he has termed "Netizens:"

> There are people online who actively contribute towards the development of the Net. These people understand the value of collective work and the communal aspects of public communications. These are the people who discuss and debate topics in a constructive manner, who e-mail answers to people and provide help to new-comers, who maintain FAQ files and other public information repositories, who maintain mailing lists, and so on. These are people who discuss the nature and role of this new communications medium. These are the people who as citizens of the Net, I realized were Netizens.[16]

In this light, Iranian Weblogistan can be defined along two dimensions. According to the first dimension, Weblogistan is comprised of various virtual settlements in cyberspace, which are delineated according to technical boundaries set by international and Persian WSPs. The second dimension involves Iranian personal weblogs written in the form of diaries by netizens or bloggers (the term used to describe the authors of weblogs) who share a sense of community and belong to one or more of the following groups. The first group in current Weblogistan includes personal weblogs written in Persian by bloggers who are permanent residents of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The second group consists of personal weblogs published by Iranians residing outside the Islamic Republic, the bulk of whom are from North America and Western Europe. A third group contains personal weblogs published by Iranians in languages other than Persian (mainly English, French, Urdu, and Arabic), in another language in addition to Persian, or in many different languages. A fourth group comprises weblogs published in Persian by Kurdish, Afghani, and Tajik bloggers. A fifth group includes multilingual weblogs by scholars, specialists, analysts, and readers of different ethnic identities who are interested professionally or otherwise in different issues pertaining to Iran and who dedicate their weblogs to the subject. A sixth group consists of non-individual weblogs, such group blogs, news blogs, and corporate blogs.

There are numerous variations of these virtual Weblogistan settlements. Some include writers both inside and outside of Iran. For example, groups three, four, and five might include both residents and non-residents of the Islamic Republic. Weblogs also cover a wide array of topics and interests. Additional subcategories in current Weblogistan might include different types of weblogs.

The variety of groups comprising Weblogistan serve as an indication of its extensive social boundaries. Since 2001, Weblogistan has developed at a formidable pace and has attained widespread popularity. Although its origins may be found in Western countries and technologies, it is the joining of bloggers from Iran that has given Weblogistan its edge.

THE RISE OF WEBLOGISTAN—A BRIEF BACKGROUND

Weblogistan surfaced in the Islamic Republic against the backdrop of tangible transformations during Mohammad Khatami's presidency (1997-2005). This period witnessed growing investments in

the local telecommunications infrastructure, which was promoted by the government and increased availability of relatively low-cost computers from East Asia. This was followed by a proliferation of internet service providers (ISPs), the rapid expansion of the internet, and improved access technologies, especially in the major urban centers.[17] Exponentially, growth was indicated by domestic usage and public access points, such as in universities, research centers, libraries, and internet cafes.[18] From 1999 to 2006, local usage of the internet rose from an estimated 250,000 users to 11.2 million. As of this writing, the Islamic Republic continues to rank as the country with highest percentage of internet users (38.6 percent) in the entire Middle East (second is Israel with 19 percent, followed by Saudi Arabia with 13.1 percent),[19] and the Telecommunication Company of Iran (TCI) has forecasted 25 million internet users in the country by 2009.[20]

Further technological advancements during late 1990s and early 2000s were central to the rise of Weblogistan. Most notably in this respect were the international incorporation of the Unicode system—which supports Persian fonts—and the launching of the first provider of free webpages and publishing tools in Persian. PersianBlog commenced operation by hosting Persian weblog tools in June 2002. It was followed by other weblog services such as BlogFa, Mihanblog, Blogsky, and Parsiblog, which were launched during the course of 2004. The Persian weblog hosts, similar to the international prototypes (published in English), offered free service accompanied by easy-to-use software. Henceforth, internet accessibility and basic computer skills were all that were required for rapid self-publishing in Persian on the World Wide Web.

News of Weblogistan swiftly spread throughout the Islamic Republic by old and new forms of mass media. Rumors, instructions, and invitations to join the blogosphere passed by word of mouth, email, newsgroups, and even graffiti of URLs (Uniform Resource Locators) on street walls, postboxes, and bus seats.

In addition to the results of a decade of war with Iraq, a troubled economy, and massive waves of immigration to and from Iran, the late 1990s were also marked by the Second of Khordad reform movement (the local date of Khatami's election in 1997) and an atmosphere seemingly hospitable to change. Azadeh Moaveni, the *Time Magazine* reporter in Tehran, observed in her memoir how "young people were busy launching weblogs… intellectuals were writing innovative, sparkling satire, graphic designers were creating websites for the west. Their interest was turning intensely outward, to the world of ideas outside."[21] Ongoing factional political disputes regarding the extent of the state's control over mainstream media became more overt among senior officials of the Islamic Republic.[22] Promises of greater freedom of the press also appeared in Khatami's preliminary election manifesto, but eventually amounted to recurrent crackdowns on local newspapers, especially during his second term in office. From April 2000 to April 2001 the authorities closed down more than 57 newspapers and publications (most of which were pro-reform), leaving approximately 1,500 press industry workers, including journalists, unemployed.[23] Under such circumstances, Iranian writers and journalists diverted their activity from printed to electronic media and joined other netizens in Weblogistan.
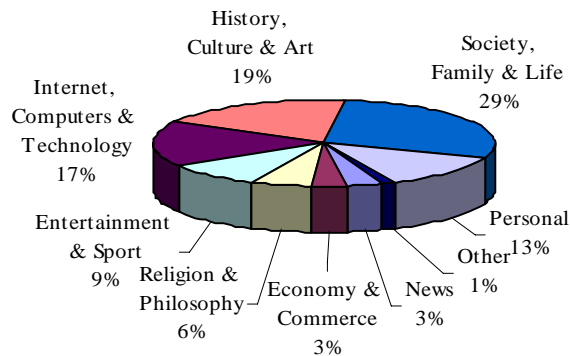
The sense of revitalization encouraged both individuals and social groups to retest the limits of the state's forbearance. With 40 percent of Iran's population (in 2007, estimated at around 68.5 million) between the ages of 15 and 35—the most active age group of net users and bloggers—the country's unique demography has contributed to the high receptiveness of the new cyber-sphere activity.[24] The option to choose what personal details to reveal online as well as the ability to publish anonymously under pseudonyms, aliases, and even invented identities granted rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of information, which had previously been restricted.

Young and ordinary citizens from across the country have articulated their sense of self, grievances, spontaneous thoughts, casual ideas, and intuitive emotions in public. Referring to the active and open debates that transpired in Weblogistan, Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Hossein Saffar-Harandi, stated that such conditions allowed everyone to "comment on current affairs as if he or she were president."[25] As bloggers were drawn to Weblogistan for various reasons (curiosity, experimentation, influence of others, entertainment, etc.), the weblog was initially based on the guiding principal of traditional personal journals, that is, self-documentation. For instance, in his blog's introduction a 27-year-old blogger writes: "I am just an ordinary simple Iranian boy who wants to share his thoughts, beliefs, favorite [issues], country, society…." In a different blog, a 31-year-old oil industrial worker shares his daily experiences and his hobby of photography. A Tehran-based English teacher shares her experiences as a young single woman and human rights activist in her weblog; and in yet another blog, a professor of social science shares his thoughts on Islam and Iran.

Iranian Weblogistan has continued to proliferate as weblogs have begun discussing myriad topics, including for example: sports, health and hygiene, lifestyle, caricatures and jokes, and current affairs. Data collected during October 2006 from four of the major Persian weblog hosts (PersianBlog, BlogFa, Mihanblog, and Parsiblog) indicate a subtotal of 178,957 weblogs classified by subject.[26] Traffic rankings by Alexa also reveal that 87 percent of all users of these specific hosts originate from Iran and the rest are from countries with high rates of Iranian immigrants (the United Arab Emirates, Canada, the United States, Sweden, and Germany).[27] Although these figures change constantly, 500-600 new weblogs are added daily to PersianBlog alone.[28] The following diagram indicates the major tendencies of Iranian-based weblog topics as: daily family life (29 percent), culture (19 percent), computer technology (17 percent), and personal experiences (13 percent).

Distribution of Iranian Blogs By Subject (2006)

History,
Culture & Art
19%

Society,
Family & Life
29%

Internet,
Computers &
Technology
17%

Entertainment
& Sport
9%

Religion &
Philosophy
6%

Economy &
Commerce
3%

News
3%

Other 1%

Personal 13%

It comes as no surprise that the sensitive category of "politics" is not included in the list of categories that bloggers define as subjects of their weblogs. It would be wrong to assume that politics is not a major topic in Weblogistan. Despite the risks involved, highly opinionated and frequently well-informed Iranian-based bloggers also comment on domestic and international politics. Debates on political affairs are especially high during times of national crisis, such as the December 2003 earthquake in Bam, the 2006 nuclear row, and local and national elections (in 2004 for the Majlis, in 2005 for the presidency, and in 2006 for municipalities and the Assembly of Experts).

Thus, weblog connectivity has also enabled interactions and collective networking among like-minded savvy net users as well as the discussion of topics of mutual interest worldwide. Sharing ideas and opinions, technological knowledge, and audio-visual files have also become central features of Weblogistan. Online collaborations are also manifested in group blogs, maintained by several authors. For instance, students at the Sharif University of Technology tend to use weblogs as a forum for conversations, community forums, and discussion groups. Another interesting example is the unofficial Iranian cultural documentation of visual street arts weblog, where young artists document and display graffiti, urban signs, and stickers in support of underground artists living in Iran.

Hitherto, the circumstances that cultivated Weblogistan and its considerable growth in the Islamic Republic have been outlined. This background highlights some of the major challenges Weblogistan has posed to the Islamic Republic in recent years. By facilitating worldwide interactions and national collaborations, Weblogistan has been compromising many of the country's social and political restrictions.

THE CHALLENGES OF WEBLOGISTAN

Emerging as an integral part of the international blogosphere, Weblogistan has developed into a global space that does not abide by any standards of ethics or practices. Since the Islamic Republic has been promoting public internet use, in particular from the mid-1990s, Weblogistan was initially allowed to develop without any serious restrictions by the authorities.[29] As such, weblogs manifest potential hazards to expression and behavioral taboos that have prevailed in the country ever since the establishment of the Islamic Republic.

By cutting across age, class, ethnic, and geopolitical boundaries, the internet in general and weblog connectivity in

particular have been loosening some of the state's fundamental perceptions concerning social order and its sex segregation policies. Free and anonymous expression mediated by computers and practiced in the privacy of one's home (or an isolated computer station) has also enabled the dismantling of social and physical restraints. The unedited, and informal nature of weblogs has turned them into a source of empowerment for Iranian youth and especially for Iranian women. It enables them to access critical information (such as health and law), form online communities, gain social support, and experience mixed gender interactions. Ever since the early 1980s, the Islamic Republic has displayed sheer consistency in enforcing sex segregation measures. The most conspicuous forms are the compulsory *chador* (veil) for women and routine moral patrols clamping down on parks, restaurants, and other public places where young couples tend to group. Indeed, moral concerns over indecent and subversive internet content are not exclusive to the Islamic Republic,[30] yet they have been especially troubling for states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, which restrict interaction between men and women who are not related.[31]

Beyond redefining personal connectivity in the Islamic Republic, Weblogistan has also been an outlet through which unmonitored contents have made their way into the country. The free flow of information, along with foreign cultural invasion—mainly from the United States—has slowly diminished the cultural isolation imposed on the local population by the state. All the more so, this flow of information stands in contradiction to the Islamic Republic's doctrine. On the one hand, it has contested the propagation of proper Islamic and revolutionary values. On the other hand, it has challenged the

campaign against the Anglo-American cultural onslaught, or "Westoxication" (*gharbzadegi*). Thus, while satellite television dishes and Western movies were confiscated, Iranian-based bloggers were discussing Harry Potter, Nicole Kidman, and Beyoncé.[32] The breach opened by Weblogistan also managed to bypass the state's traditional controls over the mainstream media (MSM) and its monopoly over the telecommunications market (until 2006).[33]

No less troubling for the Islamic Republic has been the free flow of information coming out of the country. Soon after they began to multiply in 2002, Iranian personal weblogs managed to attract the attention of the international MSM, and a new kind of grassroots reporting and participatory journalism was born. Weblogs published by Iranian resident citizens and firsthand observers commenting on the happenings in Iran were gaining recognition, especially by the Western media, as supplementary or alternative sources to the Islamic Republic's official news outlets. A notable case in point was the coverage of the June 2003 demonstration and the launch of a solidarity campaign by bloggers worldwide in support of Iranian students.

Weblogs proved highly beneficial, especially in covering domestic policies that the authorities had deliberately withheld from the national and international public or that had been discarded as not newsworthy. Iranian-Kurdish bloggers, for instance, were able to expose details of the July 2005 clashes between the local Kurdish population and the Iranian security forces in the town of Mahabad, when no other news coverage was available. Another notable weblog exposure captured on camera the violent suppression of the June 12, 2006 women activists'

protest in Tehran's Haft-e Tir Square. Female demonstrators and male supporters were protesting against civic and labor discrimination, such as the minimum legal age at which a person may be charged and tried as an adult (currently it is nine for girls and 15 for boys), a woman's testimonial value in court (which currently carries only half the weight of a man's), and equal parental rights in child custody. The peaceful demonstration soon turned violent when security forces began to spray-paint (a tactic used in order to be able to identify the women protestors, who are all veiled) and arrest demonstrators. Several hours following the incident, photographs of the clash between the protestors and armed policewomen were circulated through Weblogistan. One of the photos, taken by Mansour Nasiri, even won the Kaveh Golestan photojournalism award later that year, but the Ministry of Culture banned it from being officially displayed in public.[34]

The extensive coverage the phenomenon has received in the international media raised Weblogistan's status, and it came to play a role in the international agenda of Western MSM. Offering an alternative source of uncensored information to foreign media set an additional challenge for the Islamic Republic, as it compromised the country's international prestige, especially in relation to human rights. Yet international attention has also put Iranian-based bloggers in a tight spot. On the one hand, weblogs have gained recognition as an important forum for debate and a valuable source of information. Yet on the other hand, they have become targets of government efforts to limit freedom of expression.

Confronted with these challenges, the Islamic Republic began to apply multiple measures, passing new laws and implementing existing ones, and activating

comprehensive internet filtering and control-monitoring over Weblogistan, especially since 2003. At first, the authorities vehemently denied claims of any filtering activities, and even today Iranian officials rarely address the actual extent of state censorship over internet use and weblogs in particular. Yet online, the filtering of Weblogistan is surprisingly transparent, and internet users are notified (occasionally both in Persian and English) if a weblog is blocked.

CAMPAIGNING AGAINST WEBLOGISTAN

The April 2003 arrest of blogger, former journalist, and film critic Sina Motallabi signaled that Weblogistan had aroused the attention of the authorities in Iran. Charged with threatening national security, Motallabi was released the following month after posting a very high bail. His arrest dissuaded other bloggers, and they removed past postings and adopted self-censorship for fear of similar acts of retribution by the authorities. Such concerns were soon realized, as Motallabi's case was the first in a series of crackdowns on bloggers and other internet dissidents.

In February 2004, a proposed legislative article "on punishment of crimes linked to the internet" was first introduced as a supplementary addition to the country's press law. The new article specified a prison sentence of one to three years for publishing information considered a threat to national security and five to 15 years for disclosing sensitive information to foreign states or foreign organizations.[35] The article also specifies about 20 forms of online violations, such as offenses against Islamic and revolutionary values, Iran's leadership, top clerics, and Khomeini's teachings. In the spirit of the law, the head of the

judiciary, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, announced that "anyone who disseminates information aimed at disturbing the public mind through computer systems would face the consequences."[36] Later that year, the judiciary also set up a special division to investigate and prosecute internet dissidents. Further instructions were passed to all ISPs (internet service providers) and ICPs (internet content providers) in the country ordering them to close every proxy server port used to bypass filtration.

Under this new legislative framework, more than 20 bloggers and internet journalists, mostly in their early twenties, were detained between August and November 2004.[37] Among them was Mojtaba Samienejad, a 27-year-old student who was sentenced to two years imprisonment for "insulting the Supreme Guide" and ten more months for inciting "immorality."[38] With the election of the new Majlis that year, 2004 witnessed perhaps the most disturbing clampdown on bloggers and internet dissidents. The wave of arrests included Mahboubeh Abbas-Gholizadeh, the editor of the women's rights journal *Farzaneh*, and Fereshteh Ghazi of the daily *Etemad*. The two women were accused (among others things) of endorsing democracy online and of "immoral behavior." After being held in custody for a couple of months, they were released on high bail, and together with fellow blog-journalists Hanif Mazroi, Massoud Ghoreishi, and Arash Naderpour filed a formal complaint for being mistreated, tortured, and violently interrogated during their detention. Following the appeal, the head of judiciary, Shahroudi, ordered the formation of an internal investigation committee to probe the bloggers' claims, and in December 2004 the group appeared before a special

presidential committee. During the course of the procedures, some of the bloggers reported attempts to obstruct the investigation by the underlings of the judge Saeed Mortazavi, Tehran's general prosecutor.[39] By the time the special committee completed the investigation and finished its report, a new government, under Ahmadinejad, had come into office.[40]

Further state sanctions in the form of technical filtering and blocking were also implemented on the Iranian cyber-sphere. Iranian weblogs such as *Faryad-e Beseda* ("dawn of freedom"), published by Najma Omidparvar, was "disabled due to terms of service violation."[41] The blocking of Omidparvar's weblog followed her arrest in March 2005. Based on evidence found on her confiscated computer and CD ROMs, the Revolutionary Court in the city of Rafsanjan found her guilty of acting against the regime by showing disrespect to former president Khatami on her weblog. Omidparvar, pregnant at that time, was released after 24 days, but her husband and co-blogger, Mohammad Reza Nasab Abdolahi, was sentenced to six months imprisonment and a heavy fine for insulting the state's leaders, expressing anti-governmental propaganda, and working with foreign media.[42]

The responsibility for filtering indecent websites and weblogs from outside the country, as well as regulating domestic internet activity, was assigned to Iranian ISPs, which filter internet content by using various commercial filterware products of their choice. The implementation of different filtering software has resulted, according to Nart Villeneuve, in a lack of standardization in the contents blocked in the country.[43] Western filtering technology originally intended to enable parental control and deny access to pornographic sites is now used to block secret lists of

immoral and politically offensive sites in countries such Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen, although every country outlines its own filtering strategy.[44] Iranian ISPs failing to comply with the state's filtering strategy face heavy penalties and the revocation of their licenses.[45]

Yet these filtering policies have not always produced the most efficient and sufficient results. First, this is due to the advancing nature of online communication technology. Iranian-based net users are offered technical assistance in the form of online gateways for censored sites from outside the country. Second, using filterware (or content filtering) sometimes hinders the state's online projects as well. For instance, in October 2006, a special seminar was held on "Women and the Internet in the Third Millennium." The seminar was sponsored by the Women's Affairs Department of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp and received online coverage. For the potential target audience in Iran, the official announcement of this seminar was filtered because of an illicit word. Since online searches for the word "women" may generate "immoral" results (e.g. pornography), many of the women's organizations and social NGOs in Iran are filtered as well.[46] Nonetheless, these technical glitches have not prevented the authorities from continuing to tighten their control and filtering policies over the internet and Weblogistan. The same month, the government added yet another restriction by instructing all ADSL providers to limit private users and internet cafes to a maximum connection speed of 128kps, thus making data transmission and the downloading of large files—especially of images and videos—very difficult. An additional article was released by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance

ordering all websites and weblogs to officially register on a special site that was designated for this purpose by January 1, 2007.[47]

Members of the religious establishment have also expressed their discomfort with the entire phenomenon of internet use and its devastating effects. In a lecture delivered to deputies of the Political Department of the Islamic Guard Corps on February 15, 2006, the Grand Ayatollah Nasir Makarem-Shirazi (b. 1924) stated that satellites and the internet were destructive to the morality and belief tenets of the young generation in Iran and that some of the publications were destructive tools in the hands of the enemy. The specific nature of Ayatollah Makarem-Shirazi's important message did not prevent it from being posted on his personal website.[48]

COOPTING THE MEDIUM FOR THE MESSAGE

The Internet as a new digital medium already played a key role in the May 1997 presidential election, when leading candidates Mohammad Khatami and Speaker of Parliament Ali Akbar Nategh Nuri formed official websites publishing their political platforms. In 2003, Mohammad Ali Abtahi, vice president during Khatami's second presidential term, was the first acting cabinet member in the Islamic Republic to launch a personal weblog. Regardless of Abtahi's failed attempts to convince the former president to publish his own weblog, by the 2005 presidential elections, blogs were incorporated into the local political campaigns. Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's fans, for instance, endorsed his presidential candidacy through several semi-official weblogs, and Mostafa Moeen, professor of pediatrics and former minister, met

regularly with bloggers and began publishing his own journal online.

Over the course of two years, from 2003 to 2005, most of the country's prominent grand ayatollahs accumulated the new digital technology into their routine public activity. By publishing their biographical notes, speeches, written works, official visits, and photo galleries, they established what became known unofficially as the "Webatollah." Senior clerics—such as Ali Husseini Khamene'i (b. 1939), the supreme leader; Abddolkarim Mousavi Ardebili (b. 1926), the head of the judicial system under Khomeini; and Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi (b. 1934), member of the Assembly of Experts and also widely regarded as president Ahmadinejad's mentor—initiated their personal multilingual official personal websites managed by a board of advisors, office staff, translators, and theology students.

Additional special projects were also launched by other leading clerics. Grand Ayatollah Yousef Saane'i (b. 1927) hosted a special chat room during the month of Ramadan. Internet users were encouraged to raise questions for Saane'i regarding human rights, religion, and women's rights during fixed hours of the day.[49] By supplying immediate and direct answers online to such questions relating to permission to use contraceptives, to inquiring whether or not looking at a non-Muslim woman's body parts is lawful, and even asking for guidance in voting in presidential elections, Saane'i and other Iranian senior ayatollahs have been making themselves available and transparent to the public.

The abundant activity of Iranian leading clerics on the World Wide Web should not come as a surprise. Modern technology played a key role in mobilizing the popular movement of the 1979 revolution against Mohammad Reza Shah. Khomeini's oppositional messages and teachings made their way from his exile in France to the people of Iran via cassette tapes and fax machines, by now old fashioned communication technologies.[50] This current online presence also bears the mark of the e-government (or e-state) project under the framework of the TAKFA national reform program.[51] The general program, approved by the Iranian cabinet in 2002, was designated to advance all governmental branch services to the public via electronic channels. Further shifts to improve the government's interactions with the business sector and public organizations were initiated through e-commerce, e-banking, and e-education. An initial budget of 100 million dollars was approved by the Majlis for the program.[52]

Various forms of information and communication networks, promoted in Iran ever since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, have also proved instrumental to the propagation and dissemination of its Shi'a doctrine in other Islamic countries. The internet's potential to reach millions all around the world was soon found to be even more compelling and effective than radio and television. Addressing this issue, Ali Akbar Javanfekr, Ahmadinejad's presidential press advisor, announced that "government agencies are setting up websites due to the shortcomings of traditional news outlets."[53] Aalulbayt, the Global Information Center for Shi'ism, had already been established by 1998. Under the supervision of Grand Ayatollah Sistani's office, the center offers in-depth information in 30 different languages. Its main objective is spreading Shi'a culture and interpretations via the internet, creating a direct link between prominent theology scholars in Qom and the public.

In September 2006, Hojjatoleslam Hamid Shahriari, the secretary general of the Information Dissemination Supreme Council (IDSC), under the supervision of Ahmadinejad, also reported of the council's plans to expand the presence of religious content on the web for the public and of intentions to enforce the morality code over weblogs. He further remarked that different voices in cyberspace have their audiences, and it is necessary to modify and improve these voices. Therefore, he added, "we support weblogs, especially religious and Koranic ones, and guide the rest." He further stipulated that by guiding "we mean providing certain… advice and guidelines."[54]

Accordingly, Ahmadinejad also requested that the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (MCIT) design a national computer network, as he considered the current network insecure and precarious.[55] During a speech at the 13th Press and News Agencies Fair, he stressed that the national press did not include enough analysis and criticism, and "it is quite difficult to analyze an event, given it should be treated correctly…. Despite circulation and reducing budget, the media personnel should not disregard their major responsibilities."[56] Three months following this declaration, he confirmed weblogs to be important carriers of ideology and state propaganda, especially in exposure to youth and to international public opinion. In early August 2006, Ahmadinejad launched his personal multilingual online journal. During the special ceremony that was held for the occasion, the president promised to dedicate "five minutes per week to write in his weblog." Yet as of this writing, as he himself has admitted, urgent matters of the state have kept him from frequent blogging.

As leading politicians have openly joined Weblogistan, the authorities began endorsing religious and Koranic weblogs and promoting their public exposure.[57] Seminary students in Qom are being trained to become active net users, develop Islamic software, and expand Shi'a clerical transparency online.[58] In March 2006, the First International Koranic Blogging Festival was launched in Iran with the intention of increasing the leading and younger generation's study and contemplation of Koranic and religious issues based on their needs and interests.[59] In recent years, various group weblogs have become more transparent online with their vocal support of the Islamic Republic and advancement of its Islamic message "against satanic activism via computer networking."[60] Nonetheless, although the leadership is directly or indirectly promoting these groups as bastions of the Islamic Republic's future, they also pose an additional challenge to the regime, as they are more familiar than other laymen Iranians with the language of religion and Islamic religious texts.

The embracing of the internet and later of Weblogistan by the state's officials and leading clerics has made the Islamic Republic more transparent for the Iranian public and the outside world. It has managed to display some of Iran's complexities and internal contradictions. Being clerics or supporters of the Islamic Republic does not necessarily produce unanimous voices. In that respect, personal weblogs and websites are especially conducive in revealing an array of thoughts and perceptions, even in issues of jurisprudence, among the Iranian religious establishment.[61] Weblogistan has become a channel through which these different voices can be heard as well. One case in point is a weblog calling for the release of

Ayatollah Sayed Hossein Kazemeyni Boroujerdi over concerns for his deteriorating health condition. Ayatollah Kazemeyni Boroujerdi was supposedly charged in February 2007 with "acting against state security" by advocating the separation of religion from the political basis of the Iranian state.[62]

CONCLUSION

Weblogistan, similar to the blogosphere in particular and the global inter-connective cyber-sphere in general, is still a relatively new and highly dynamic phenomenon that has not yet run its full course. Constant growth of internet accessibility, technological evolution, and changing policies towards the medium have far-reaching effects over patterns of social behavior online, which are difficult to predict.

Nonetheless, weblogging has already had a revolutionary effect on the mainstream media and on global interactions. Iran, similar to other Middle Eastern and African countries, such as Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia, is aspiring to expand the country's telecommunications services as well as to develop its economy through the use of new technologies. At the same time, these countries are operating rigorously to respond to the challenges of information and communications technology, such as Weblogistan's rapid development. Considering the country's unique demography, the future of the Islamic Republic depends upon its ability to balance these policies.

* Dr. Liora Hendelman-Baavur is a Research Fellow at the Center for Iranian Studies and a lecturer at the Department of Middle Eastern and African History, both at Tel Aviv University. She is also co-editor of Iran-Pulse *and continues to research the social and political implications of new communication technologies in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Her upcoming book focuses on* Modernizing Genders in Iranian Popular Culture from 1963 to 1979.

NOTES

[1] According to Technorati's *State of the Live Web Report* for April 2007, the leading languages in terms of blog posting volume are Japanese (37 percent), English (36 percent), and Chinese (eight percent). See: http://technorati.com/weblog/2007/04/328.html. See also: Kyumars Sheykh Esmaili, Mohsen Jamali, Mahmood Neshati, Hassan Abolhassani, and Yasaman Soltan-Zadeh, "Experiments on Persian Weblogs." (Tehran: Sharif University of Technology, 2006), submitted to the WWW2006 Workshop on Weblogging Ecosystem, Edinburgh, May 2006, http://www.blogpulse.com/www2006-workshop/papers/persian-weblogs.pdf, and Technorati's October 2006 report: http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000443.html.

[2] http://www.blogfa.com/Ads/.

[3] See: Boutorabi's interview with the Iranian Student's News Agency (ISNA), November 20, 2006, http://www.isna.ir/Main/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-828181.

[4] This review is based on ongoing research focusing on the social and political implications of new communication technologies in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

[5] "The 15 enemies of the Internet and other countries to watch," Reporters Without Borders, November 17, 2005,

http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=15613.

[6] The term "weblog" was introduced in 1997. It is attributed to the American blogger Jorn Barger.

[7] Nasrin Alavi, *We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs* (NY: Soft Skull Press, 2005), p. 1.

[8] Alireza Doostdar, "The Vulgar Spirit of Blogging: On Language, Culture, and Power in Persian Weblogestan," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 106, No. 4 (December 2004), p. 651.

[9] Erin Simmons, *The Impact of the Weblog: A Case Study of the United States and Iran*, Senior thesis presented in the Political Science Department at the Undergraduate Colleges of the Ohio State University (June 2005), p. 2.

[10] Dan Gilmore, *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People* (Sebastopol: O'Reilly Media, 2004), p. 28-29.

[11] For the Blogherald count, see: http://www.blogherald.com/2006/02/02/the-blog-herald-blog-count-february-2006-200-million-blogs-in -existence/. For Technorati's updated report, see: http://technorati.com/weblog/2007/04/328.html.

[12] *Caslon Analytics Profile: Web Logs and Blogging*, http://www.caslon.com.au/weblogprofile1.htm.

[13] Suzanne Stefanac, *Dispatches from Blogistan: A Travel Guide for the Modern Blogger* (Thousand Oaks: New Riders Press, 2006).

[14] Quentin Jones, "Virtual-Communities, Virtual Settlements & Cyber-Archaeology: A Theoretical Outline," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1997), http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol3/issue3/jones.html.

[15] Steve Fox, "The New Imagined Community: Identifying and Exploring a Bidirectional Continuum Integrating Virtual and Community Embodiment Model (CEM)," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (January 2004), pp. 47-62.

[16] Michael Hauben and Ronda Hauben, *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* (Los Alamitos: IEEE-Computer Society, 1997).

[17] For the extensive growth of the budget of the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications see: Statistical Center of Iran (SCI), 2004-2005, http://eamar.sci.org.ir.

[18] On the internet in Iran see, for example: Babak Rahimi, "Cyberdissent: the Internet in Revolutionary Iran," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* (*MERIA*) *Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (September 2003), http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2003/issue3/jv7n3a7.html.

[19] From 2000 to 2006, the Middle East witnessed an internet usage growth rate of 490 percent. See Internet World Stats, updated March 10, 2007, http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm.

[20] Library of Congress—Federal Research Division, *Country Profile: Iran, March 2006* (Library of Congress, March 2006), http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/iran/pdf. For the estimated number of internet users, see also: http://www.itna.ir/archives/news/003319.php.

[21] Azadeh Moaveni, *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (NY: Public Affairs, 2005), pp. 127-28.

[22] Abbas William Samii, "The Contemporary Iranian News Media, 1998-1999," *MERIA Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 4

(December 1999); Abbas William Samii, "Sisyphus' Newsstand: The Iranian Press under Khatami," *MERIA*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (September 2001), http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2001/issue3/jv5n3a1.html. See also: The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), *A Worldwide Survey: Attacks on the Press in 2005*, http://www.cpj.org/attacks05/mideast05/iran_05.html.

23 Gholam Khiabany and Annabelle Sreberny, "The Iranian Press and the Continuing Struggle Over Civil Society 1998-2000," *International Communication Gazette*, Vol. 63, Nos. 2-3 (2001), pp. 203-23.

24 Based on the Iranian Ministry of Information and communication Technology estimates for 2006, http://www.dci.co.ir/.

25 Fars News Agency, *Social News*, February 15, 2006 (No. 8411260563), http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8411260563.

26 The data collected for this paper is based on Iranian WSPs' (Weblog Service Providers) general classification for October 2006. However, since not all hosts present the exact categorization, several topics (such as culture, history, and art) were combined for purposes of unification. It is important to note that figures presented by the four weblog hosts that were checked tend to include both active and inactive weblogs. They are also based on the initial categorization of each weblog, which in some cases may change over time.

27 Based on data collected during April 2007 from *Alexa Traffic Ranking*, http://www.alexa.com/site/ds/top_500.

28 Boutorabi's interview with ISNA, November 20, 2006, http://www.isna.ir/Main/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-828181.

29 In 1994, Iranian academic institutes joined the global network, and in 1998, the Iranian National Academic Network (INAN) was established, linking 230 scientific centers. The same year 11 universities across the country initiated Information and Communication Technology (ICT) departments. For a detailed overview, see, for example: Ahmadreza Ashrafologhalaei, *E-governance: E-state in Iran: Administrative Reform Plan* (Tehran: Management and Planning Organization, Bureau for Economic Studies and International Cooperation, 2005), http://www.engagingcommunities2005.org/abstracts/S111-ashrafologhalaei-a.html.

30 See, for example: Nart Villeneuve, "The Filtering Matrix: Integrated Mechanisms of Information Control and the Demarcation of Borders in Cyberspace," *First Monday*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (January 2006), http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue11_1/villeneuve/.

31 Alireza Doostdar has addressed yet another troubling phenomenon connected with Weblogistan as a site that also enables vulgar discussions, occasional use of aggressive tones, and offensive biased remarks. See: Alireza Doostdar, "The Vulgar Spirit of Blogging," pp. 651-62.

32 The legislature considered ending the 1995 ban on satellite dishes and receivers in 2001 and again in 2002. Despite the ongoing ban and its arbitrary enforcement, satellite dishes are very popular and are sold on the black market.

33 Until 2006, the state had a monopoly over the telecommunications market, with the exception of retail internet service provision.

34 The protest initiated a widely advertised online campaign for "one million signatures demanding changes in discriminatory

laws," which aims to collect one million signatures to advance reform in women and children's legal rights. See: http://kosoof.com/archive/304.php.

[35] "Taking Tougher Line on Internet, Authorities Try Cyber-Dissident and Draft Harsh Bill," Reporters Without Borders, August 3, 2004, http://www.rsf.org.article.php3?id_article=11066.

[36] Freedom House, *Country Report: Iran 2006*, http://www.freedomhouse.org, and also the updated report for the following year, "Freedom in the World 2007," http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/pres s_release/iran_FIW_07.pdf.

[37] "Iran: Judiciary Should Admit Blogger Abuse," *Payvand's Iran News*, April 5, 2005, http://www.payvand.com/news/05/apr/1026.html.

[38] http://man-namanam.blogpost.com.

[39] Hadi Ghaemi, "For Iran, The Man Is the Message," *The New York Times*, June 29, 2006.

[40] http://www.freedomhouse.org.

[41] http://www.faryadebeseda.persianblog.com/

[42] RSF, March 29, 2005, http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=12655.

[43] Due to the use of various filtering software, websites and weblogs that are blocked on one Iranian ISP could be accessible on another.

[44] For a review on filtering technology with an emphasis on the Iranian case, see: Villeneuve, "The Filtering Matrix: Integrated Mechanisms of Information Control and the demarcation of Borders in Cyberspace."

[45] Private ISPs must be approved by both the DCI (Data Communication Company) and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

[46] See: Jadi, "Opposing Women and Internet in the Third Millennium,'" posted on http://www.jadi.net/.

[47] For the announcement, see: http://www.samandehi.ir/about.php.

[48] "It is Enemy's Tactic to Focus on Propagation and Cultural Attack," February 16, 2006, http://www.makaremshirazi.org/english/mo dules.php?name=news&file=article&sid=2 10.

[49] http://iqna.ir/en/news_detail.php?ProdID=7 1063.

[50] Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1994), p. 119.

[51] TAKFA is the acronym in Farsi of the "National Information and Communication Technology Agenda."

[52] For details, see: http://www.takfa.ir/ and also, Ahmadreza Ashrafologhalaei, "E-governance: E-state in Iran: Administrative Reform Plan," (Tehran: Management and Planning Organization, Bureau for Economic Studies and International Cooperation, 2005), p. 1.

[53] http://www.isna.ir/Main/NewsView.aspx?I D=News-793225&Lang=p.

[54] http://www.ikna.ir/en/news_detail.php?Pro dID=71794.

[55] Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), July 31, 2006, http://www.president.ir/eng/ahmadinejad/cr onicnews/1385/05/09/index-e.htm#b3.

[56] IRNA, May 8, 2006, http://www.president.ir/eng/ahmadinejad/cr onicnews/1385/02/18/index-e.htm#b2.

[57] Koranic weblogs are composed by at least three main groups: those who focus on the meanings and interpretations of Koranic verses, those who conduct research on the Koran, and those who study the historical importance of the stories mentioned in the Koran. Religious weblogs are dedicated to issues pertaining to the daily ritual and moral practices of Islam.

[58] See, for example: Robert Tait, "Iran: Mullahs Jump on the 'Weblogestan' Bandwagon," *South China Morning Post*, October 12, 2006, http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=55162.

[59] Iranian Quran News Agency (IQNA), March 3, 2006, http://iqna.ir/en/news_detail.php?ProdID=44881.

[60] One notable group is *The Muslim Bloggers*. Another group is *Khomeini's Offspring*—bloggers dedicated to continuing Khomeini's way and promoting his objectives.

[61] Elaine Sciolino, "Cleric Uses Weapon of Religion Against Iran's Rulers," *New York Times*, September 18, 2000.

[62] http://bameazadi8.blogfa.com/post-1.aspx.