

# The Politics of/in Blogging in Iran

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One of the well-recognized paradoxes of Iranian society is that while the “fat government” of the Islamic Republic filters Internet access, Persian bloggers number in the hundreds of thousands, making Persian among the top five most popular languages of the global blogosphere. It is yet another paradox of Iran that while formal politics is constrained and configured by specifically Islamic sentiments and government sensibilities, Iranian youth—among other social categories—are developing powerful and poetic political voices, analyzing national and international issues and public and private concerns in their blogs.

These issues are not simply a function of the sudden availability of new technologies or the existence of a large youthful population under thirty years old (estimated at 70 percent of the total population), although these are both contextual realities. Rather, these issues speak to a fundamental problem of the definition of the “political.” There exists a widespread perception of the Islamic Republic as a highly repressive state in which there is little or no “politics,” this view itself being based on an overly crude distinction between repressive, undemocratic states and democratic states. However, we would argue that what is meant by the sphere of the political is always contentious and contingent. Even within liberal democracies, the demarcation between the public and the private as the cornerstone of the limits of state intervention has been revealed by feminist and critical theory as a powerful and enduring myth. Thus while the social might be defined as the realm of sedimented social practices, not all of which are put into question at the same time, the realm of the political is both where agonistic debate about social practices takes place and where hegemony functions to frame and limit that debate and to redefine the social at any one point in time.

Chantal Mouffe expresses this idea very clearly:

The frontier between the social and the political is essentially unstable and requires constant displacements and negotiations between social agents. Things could always be otherwise and therefore every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities. It is in this sense that it can be called “political” since it is the expression of a particular structure of power relations. Power is constitutive of the social because the social could not exist without the power relations through which it is given shape.<sup>1</sup>

For students of Iran, it is difficult to look beyond the long and heavy hand of the state to see (i.e., to define) and to analyze (i.e., to determine the forms of) emergent political practices; of course, “emergent” begs the question of how and through what criteria and when these are fully “emerged.”

For students of politics, it is difficult to let go of the illusory distinction between repressive and hegemonic states, since behind all hegemonic power lies physical force and a crude modeling of Southern states as autocratic or “failed.” But a loosening of these categories is nec-

essary in order to better define the actually existing structures and practices of politics. Indeed, one of the conceptual dangers is that in a desire to “de-Westernize” media theory, we simply fall into equally crude and ill-defined nominalisms of political categorization that themselves derive from Western political theory.<sup>2</sup> We do *not* advocate the abandonment of either Western media or political theorizations, but merely point out that abandoning one for the other is not necessarily an improvement.

For students of communication, especially of political communication, it is difficult not to fall into techno-idealism and to see all uses of new technologies as having liberatory potential, indeed as all being intensely political, while at the same time not ignoring—again—actually emerging political voices, arguments, and antagonisms. Pace Mouffe, we argue that “it is impossible to determine a priori what is social and what is political independently of any contextual reference,” and our point of reference is the Persian blogosphere under the Islamic Republic.<sup>3</sup> Mindful of these conceptual minefields, but not able to resolve all of them, this article explores the Iranian blogosphere as a vital site of political discourse that does extend the definition of the political into personal, gendered, and social realms.

This intriguing and complex arena throws up many analytic issues, not all of which can be addressed here. In this article, we do two things. First, we historicize the rise of Iranian blogging and look at the emergence of Web logs in the context of the rapidly expanding Iranian communications industries; that is, we examine the wider social context of Iranian communications and situate the growth of blogging within the expansion of the Iranian telecommunications sector, its rapid modernization and privatization. And second, we attempt a categorization of the kind and content of blogs and analyze some key sites, using three significant and powerful dichotomies that serve to define the political

sphere: the public/private, the formal/informal, and the individual/collective. Another important dichotomy, that of the inside/outside in relation to Iranian national space, is mentioned but cannot be fully elaborated here.

By locating the recent developments in the context of ongoing popular protests and the intensifying power struggle within the Iranian state, we suggest that a large number of Iranian blogs have taken on the important role of offering a platform for discussion, debates, and dissent in a volatile and vibrant political environment. We demonstrate that while limited access to the Internet remains a crucial factor, there are other sides to the realities of the “digital divides” in Iran, not only in terms of usage, but also in relation to concerns, desires, and aspirations.

### A Brief Historical Overview

The first Iranian Web log was created in September 2001 by Salman Jariri.<sup>4</sup> Two months later Hossein Derakhshan launched his Web log in Persian.<sup>5</sup> Derakhshan was a young Iranian journalist who had worked for some by-then defunct reformist newspapers such as *Asr-e Azadeghan* and *Hayat-e no* and had moved to Canada after the closure of many publications in 2000. In response to numerous queries from his readers about how to create and run a Web log, he released a Web log construction guide in Persian in the hope that the number of Iranian Web logs would reach a hundred within a year. In less than two months, by the end of 2001, there were more than two hundreds Iranian Web logs; by the beginning of 2003 their number had increased to the tens of thousands. A report by Masoud Behnoud on the BBC Persian Web site estimated that there were thirteen thousand Web logs in Iran in 2003, while Pedram Moalemian, another Iranian blogger, claimed that the number of active Web logs written in Persian had reached fifty thousand by May 2003.<sup>6</sup> Another estimate suggests that by 2002 the numbers had increased to well over sixty thou-

2. James Curran and Myung-Jin Park, eds., *Dewesternising Media Studies* (London: Routledge, 2000).

3. Mouffe, *On the Political*, 17.

4. Salman Jariri, [shalakhteh.persianblog.com/1385\\_5\\_shalakhteh\\_archive.html#5471405](http://shalakhteh.persianblog.com/1385_5_shalakhteh_archive.html#5471405); Salman's Weblog, [www.globalpersian.com/salman/weblog.html](http://www.globalpersian.com/salman/weblog.html).

5. Hossein Derakhshan, Editor: Myself; a Weblog on Iran, Technology, and Pop Culture, [i.hoder.com](http://i.hoder.com).

6. Masoud Behnoud, “Weblog: Media of News or Opinion,” BBC Persian, [www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2004/11/041107\\_mj-mb-iran-web-log-anniv.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2004/11/041107_mj-mb-iran-web-log-anniv.shtml) (accessed 12 February 2006); Pedram Moalemian, “Yet More Blogs,” [www.eyeranian.net/?p=313](http://www.eyeranian.net/?p=313) (accessed 12 February 2006).

sand.<sup>7</sup> One of the latest reports estimates the number of Iranian blogs at seven hundred thousand.<sup>8</sup> Undoubtedly, this is a remarkable figure, but it is not quite clear (as is the case with all remarkable figures about online media) how the numbers are calculated. This report notes that the figures refer to total blog numbers and not active blog numbers, which it estimates to be between 40,000 and 110,000.

In addition to the question of the actual number of “active” blogs, there is another dispute over what constitutes an Iranian blog. If Iranian blogs are defined in terms of language, this means omission of a large number of Iranian bloggers who write in other languages, most notably English, while including a number of bloggers from Afghanistan or Tajikistan who write in Persian. Focusing on Iranian bloggers writing *inside* the country also leads to excluding a large number of Iranian bloggers writing in Persian *outside* Iran. One important analytic issue about the Iranian blogosphere centers on the dynamic relationship between Iran and its diasporas, activity inside Iran and activity outside. There is little doubt that the Internet in general and the blogosphere in particular blur issues of distance and geographical separation, tie diasporas to their national and cultural homelands in often unexpected ways, and support the emergence of new forms of political engagement between those inside the polity and those outside identifying as Iranian and wanting to be involved. There is not sufficient space to elaborate these arguments here.

To return to numbers, simply focusing on Iranian blogs that use blog providers such as PersianBlog is not useful either since many of those inside Iran use foreign service providers such as blogger.com to escape the restrictions and controls exercised by Iranian Web log farms. Also, as Koorosh Eslamzade points out, increasingly some of Iran’s blog service provid-

ers have international clients from countries such as China and Germany.<sup>9</sup> According to the same source, another reason for disputing the accuracy of figures provided by many sites is the very significant fact that increasingly there are many collective (*grouhi*) Web logs, and it is not clear whether figures refer to the number of blogs or the number of bloggers. Nevertheless, the fact is that even the most conservative estimates of the number of Web logs in Iran is impressive, a point highlighted by then president Mohammad Khatami during the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva in 2003.<sup>10</sup> In order to defend the record of his administration, and brushing aside serious criticisms raised by many that Iran was actively repressing the potential of technology, he stressed that Persian Web logs were ranked only behind Web logs written in English and French (see table 1).

**Table 1. Top ten Web log farms, 2003**

Farm	Rank	Numbers	% Share
blogspot.com	1	60,642	21.85
persianblog.com	2	20,440	7.37
blogdrive.com	3	17,831	6.43
modblog.com	4	14,785	5.33
livejournal.com	5	10,518	3.79
20six.fr	6	6,422	2.31
myblog.de	7	4,988	1.80
nikki-k.jp	8	3,630	1.31
co.uk	9	3,434	1.24
cocolog-nifty.com	10	3,172	1.14

Sources: Phil Wolf, “Does Ping Data Show Power Law Applies to Weblog Market Share?” Blogcount.com, [dijest.com/bc/2004\\_08\\_01\\_bc.html](http://dijest.com/bc/2004_08_01_bc.html) (accessed 12 October 2005); Duncan Riley, “The Blog Herald Blog Count October 2005: Over 100 Million Blogs Created,” Blog Herald, [www.blogherald.com/2005/10/10/the-blog-herald-blog-count-october-2005](http://www.blogherald.com/2005/10/10/the-blog-herald-blog-count-october-2005) (accessed 12 October 2005).

7. Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi, “Performance in Everyday Life and the Rediscovery of the ‘Self’ in Iranian Weblogs,” *Badjens: Iranian Feminist Newsletter*, September 2004, [www.badjens.com/rediscovery.html](http://www.badjens.com/rediscovery.html).

8. Duncan Riley, “The Blog Herald Blog Count October 2005: Over 100 Million Blogs Created,” Blog Herald, [www.blogherald.com/2005/10/10/the-blog-herald-blog-count-october-2005](http://www.blogherald.com/2005/10/10/the-blog-herald-blog-count-october-2005) (accessed 12 October 2005).

9. Koorosh Eslamzade, “How Many Iranian Blogs?” [weblogcrawler.blogspot.com/2005/08/blog-post\\_112812672727486398.html](http://weblogcrawler.blogspot.com/2005/08/blog-post_112812672727486398.html) (accessed 12 October 2005).

10. Statement by Mohammad Khatami, [www.itu.int/wsisis/geneva/coverage/statements/iran/ir.html](http://www.itu.int/wsisis/geneva/coverage/statements/iran/ir.html) (accessed 15 October 2005).

The phenomenon of Iranian blogging is recognized within global blogging networks. For example, the figure above came as an astonishing shock to Blogcount, which wrote, “Persianblog in second. Large surprise. Considering its alphabet, impossible for me to really know. Are the Arab language weblogs in another country also blogs of Iran?”<sup>11</sup> The answer is no. But the figure is even more astonishing considering the fact that not all Iranian bloggers use PersianBlog as a farm, with thousands using other Web log service providers. This staggering and unexpected growth has whetted the appetite of private service providers, and in the past few years many more have emerged to compete for dominance and revenue. These include PersianBlog, Blogfa, BlogSky, Mihanblog, Parsiblog, Jablogi, Ariablog, Blog Negar, and Caspian Blog. The first four service providers are also the biggest, and while PersianBlog remains the oldest and the biggest of all service providers (with around six hundred thousand blogs), its competitors have made a huge dent in its popularity.<sup>12</sup> According to the Alexa Web traffic monitor, Blogfa (with fifty-five thousand blogs) is the fourth most popular site in Iran, after Yahoo, Google, and the Mehr news agency site ([mehrnews.com](http://mehrnews.com)). Other top-ranking sites are Mihanblog, with twenty thousand blogs (7), and PersianBlog (8), followed by Blogger.com (11) and BlogSky, with seven thousand blogs (37).

#### Reasons for Blogging’s Rapid Growth

Web log service providers (or Web log farms) in Iran have emerged as part of the rapid changes in Iran’s communications industries, economic liberalization, and the growing demand for communications channels. A number of reasons have contributed to the expansion of blogs in Iran. Obviously the availability of software, the expansion of Internet access and usage, and the existence of a large number of technologically literate young Iranians are key factors. But these factors do not in themselves explain the growth and popularity of blogs in Iran.

Economic reasons are undoubtedly significant. Unlike other media, including the press,

broadcasting, and music, blogs can be launched with very few economic resources. Undoubtedly, one needs a computer, connection to the Internet, and some ideas for content. But the huge economic barrier to entry, as is the case for other media, is not an issue. In most cases, even for collective blogs, not much division of labor is required; making money or breaking even is not a key target or necessary for survival. Blogs in this sense are a good example of forms of “small media” that can exist as long as the bloggers have the necessary desires/commitments, time, and connection. In this sense, at least in the Iranian context, a blog is like an individual poem that can be produced/reproduced with little financial capital as opposed to a high-quality song that requires a band, a producer, a studio, a music label committed to promote/distribute it, and a degree of commercial success for the continued existence of the band. Undoubtedly, the irrelevance of a “business model” for bloggers is a major advantage. Iran is an environment where the state remains the biggest media proprietor and is actively trying to juggle various interests within its own domain, where broadcasting remains a state monopoly and a tightly controlled propaganda machine, and where the closures of many newspapers (including those that do support the state but are critical of certain practices and policies) are common events. Hence, blogging has emerged as a versatile, easy-to-launch, and easy-to-relaunch medium. But then again, if any of these reasons can partially explain the rapid expansion of blogs in Iran, the key question is why has this not happened in some other countries. Neither the broader “economic” model of blogs nor political repression in general is a sufficient explanation.

Undoubtedly, all these technological, economic, and political factors have contributed to the expansion that is Iranian blogs. But by this definition one might argue, with reasonable justifications, that the same thing could (and should) have happened in many societies (not least across the global South and in particular other Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt and Turkey). People in general do not automati-

11. Phil Wolf, “Does Ping Data Show Power Law Applies to Weblog Market Share?” Blogcount.com, [dijest.com/bc/2004\\_08\\_01\\_bc.html](http://dijest.com/bc/2004_08_01_bc.html) (accessed 12 October 2005).

12. “Persianblog Still the Biggest Farsi Blog Service Provider,” Fava News, [www.favanews.com/default.aspx/news\\_17034.htm](http://www.favanews.com/default.aspx/news_17034.htm) (accessed 15 March 2006).

cally start a blog just because the technology is there or they feel strong anger toward the state or major corporations blocking meaningful and democratic communication between citizens. Even if we accept the exaggerated claim of blogs as “revolutionary,” then surely we need to look at the “revolutionary situation” (context) and the “revolutionaries” (bloggers) too. As we explain later in some detail, far from being an undifferentiated mass, bloggers and their politics assume a range of broad orientations with different aims, content, forms of expression, and connections to various networks, many of them contradictory and even hostile to one another. In this sense, while the technology is increasingly universal, the content is not. Therefore the availability of technology and its cheapness or the desire for “expression” does not explain the activities of bloggers or the outcome of their efforts. It is a combination of factors—the disabling factionalism of the central Iranian state and the ongoing conflicts between Islamism and republicanism of the Islamic Republic; the intense pressure from private capital in Iran (that for so long relied on the mediation of the state to exercise class domination) seeking a much larger share in the expanding and lucrative cultural industries; and above all the existence of an already dissatisfied young population challenging the Iranian state and actively seeking a new order—that has paved the way for such a rapid growth of the blogosphere.

As we have suggested, the expansion of the Internet and popularity of blogs in Iran is regarded as a lucrative business and has paved the way for national private capital to seek a firm footing in this sector of Iran’s culture industries. With the big state-owned companies in Iran dominating the press and broadcasting market, private companies in Iran have emerged as key players in the new media. Most Internet service providers and Web log service providers are privately owned, and their services are increasingly part of much bigger media activities. PersianBlog, for example, is part of the Ariagostar Company, which provides a variety of services based on online Persian users’ needs.<sup>13</sup> Their holdings

and activities include a number of online initiatives: PersianBlog (launched 10 June 2002); Persian Talk, introduced as “one of the biggest and most popular Iranian Online Forums,” which provides discussion forums for topics such as literature, music, culture and history, theater and cinema, and so on and boasts twenty-two public rooms and two private ones; PersianPetition, which provides free online petition service for “reasonable public advocacy”; Parsvote, which started its activity with the 2005 presidential election in Iran, introduces itself under the banner of “national participation for self-determination,” and aims to provide a space for marketing researches and studies; MyPardis, which caters to online communities that have formed interest groups and is introduced as “a place to simply enjoy using the Internet”; FavaNews, another online initiative of the Aria Group, which is a news site, or news agency, that focuses on the information technology (IT) and communication fields; and FavaDargah, an information communication technology (ICT) portal that provides a comprehensive listings of various companies and services. The Aria Group is well connected to international partners. It has three “technology partners” from the United States (the Microsoft Corporation, Cisco Systems, and the Planet Data Center); two from Australia (Creative Digital Technology and Global Payment Solution); and one from the United Kingdom (Web Host Automation). Its international “business partners” include Honafa IT Group (a joint venture between Iran and the United Arab Emirates), Eje Networks (Malaysia), and Baud Telecom Company (Saudi Arabia).

Other Web log service providers are also private companies. Blogfa, the second largest service provider, is privately owned and was established by the Iranian search engine company Parseek and financed and maintained/sponsored by other private companies including Ouriran Network Solutions, Inc. (which has head offices in Tehran and Toronto). The rise of Blogfa and other service providers, and the introduction of new services by each, has intensified the competition.<sup>14</sup>

13. Ariagostar Company, [www.ariagostar.com](http://www.ariagostar.com) (accessed 15 March 2006).

14. PersianBlog recently announced that two Iranian information technology companies are in negotiation with Blogfa management over the sale of its blog services, something that was immediately

denied by Blogfa. In an announcement, Blogfa management suggested such rumors were a sign of unhealthy competition, while also claiming that such news is a clear indication of its company’s success,



Parsiblog was launched in 2005 with the aim of promoting and encouraging religious blogs and currently hosts around four thousand blogs. In an interesting development, according to the Information Technology News Agency, Parsiblog announced podcasting as a new addition to its services and had offered the possibility of Internet radio, but it retreated and suspended its offer after pressure from the state-owned Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB).<sup>15</sup> Under the Iranian constitution, broadcasting remains a state monopoly, and Parsiblog's new activities were regarded as the private sector attempting to launch private radio.

### What Are the Focus and Content of Iranian Blogs?

A closer look at the categories of existing blogs hosted by PersianBlog and Blogfa shows the diversity as well as the directions that blogging in Iran has taken (see table 2).

Blogging is distinguished from other media by its format and the tools through which it provides readers with expression of views and opinions, but it is similar to other media for the symbolic content that it delivers. In their current form, Web logs do provide a relatively free space for expression (albeit with limitations on time and resources), without the pressure of media deadlines. There is, of course, much to be said about attempts at control and censorship of the Internet by the Islamic Republic, an issue also recognized by international public opinion as in Amnesty International and the *Observer's* new campaign in May 2006 against Internet repression where Iran is mentioned. But once again, we bracket those discussions here.

There are some recognizable genres and categories of blogs used by blog farms, most notably literature, politics, personal diaries, photoblogs, and some clear examples of attempts at creative writing. The prominence of these genres can partly be explained by the nature of

the blog and its format as a diary, but also by the fact that the press and journalism in Iran developed, as was the case in southern Europe, as part of the literary and political world.<sup>16</sup> The diversity of blogs derives from this currently existing reality and a combination of economic, technological, social, and political factors. Most blogs do consist of time-stamped postings, with the latest items/posting appearing first and the rest organized in reverse chronological order. The informal nature of blogs and their unprofessional forms (their individual nature and the possibility of expressing opinions under a false name) liberate most bloggers from the conventional restrictions of other media.<sup>17</sup> Most remain a platform for expressing opinions and ideas and polemics rather than news and information. In this sense blogs, rather than target a large audience, are indeed written for the benefit of other bloggers and "communities of interests," be they configured by politics, lifestyle, poetry, technologies, and so on. Therefore, and despite their growth and popularity as a form of communication, blogs are not the most popular sites/channels of communication. The same factors (e.g., their informal nature, unprofessional aspects, individual orientation, and forms of expression) that have contributed to the rapid growth of blogs have also contributed to their current limited reach. Their huge volume undoubtedly has played a part in fragmenting the audience, and the well-known media brands (with their massive resources) will continue to play their well-established role as major providers of news and information.

Another issue revolves around the two key contentious terms at the center of much of the recent debates in communication and media studies: the public and the popular. Arguments by Hossein Derakhshan, also known as Hoder the blogger, and Ebrahim Nabavi, a well-known Iranian journalist, point to the triumph, in their terms, of the popular over the public. Using the

and acknowledged that the company has received a number of offers, including one from its main competitor, PersianBlog; news.blogfa.com/post-79.aspx.

15. "Voluntary Stop," Information Technology News Agency, [www.itna.ir/archives/news/003711.php](http://www.itna.ir/archives/news/003711.php) (15 March 2006).

16. Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini, "Comparing Media Systems," in *Mass Media and Society*, ed. James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (London: Arnold, 2005).

17. Bart Cammaerts and Nico Carpentier, "The Internet and the Second Iraqi War: Extending Participation and Challenging Mainstream Journalism?" in *Researching Media, Democracy, and Participation*, ed. Nico Carpentier, Pille Pruulman-Vengerfeldt, Kaarle Nordenstreng, Maren Hartmann, Peeter Vihalemm, and Bart Cammaerts (Tartu, Estonia: Tartu University Press, 2006), 159–77, [young.meso.ee/files/teaching\\_series\\_10k.pdf](http://young.meso.ee/files/teaching_series_10k.pdf).

**Table 2. Numbers and categories of blogs hosted by PersianBlog and Blogfa, 2005**

<b>PersianBlog</b>			
<b>News</b>		Security	633
News	1,777	Computer	8,060
Journalism	852	Internet	4,237
Total	2,629	Total	14,821
<b>Society</b>		<b>References</b>	
Commerce and exchange	2,985	Medical	359
History	969	Nature/environment	386
NGOs	479	Educational/research	5,987
Philosophy	2,178	Koran	132
Religion	3,176	Total	6,864
Total	9,787	<b>Family</b>	
<b>Leisure</b>		Private	8,869
Humor	4,047	Public	29,560
Visual game	999	Life	7,050
Total	5,046	Total	45,479
<b>World</b>		<b>Blogfa</b>	
Afghanistan	724	News and media	718
Tajikistan	116	Computer and Internet	2,397
Total	840	Commerce and economy	700
<b>Art</b>		Photoblog	200
Literature	7,104	Culture and history	146
Cinema	1,338	Sports	509
Music	1,813	Personal	5,113
Writing	2,364	Travel and tourism	56
Art	3,086	Art and literature	4,378
Total	15,705	Science and technology	1,307
<b>Sports</b>		Ideas and religion	1,082
Football	39	Blogs and blogging	404
Tennis	81	Society and politics	612
Climbing	130	Leisure and humor	1,241
Sport (general)	529	Family and life	254
Total	779	Persian speakers in other countries	128
<b>Information technology</b>		Total	19,245
Software	1,584		
Hardware	307		

Sources: "Subject List of Blogs," [www.persianblog.com/weblogs](http://www.persianblog.com/weblogs) (accessed 12 December 2005); "Subject List of Blogs," [www.blogfa.com/Members](http://www.blogfa.com/Members) (accessed 12 December 2005).

same source of information/data available via Nedstatbasic, both argue that the most popular sites in Iran are entertainment sites that show little or no interest in public matters. In an entry titled "Jeegar' vs. Political Freedoms" posted on 9 January 2004, Derakhshan (a.k.a. Hoder) begins by saying, "If you need a proof that Iranian youngsters don't have any interest in politics, you must see this stats report [Nedstatbasic] for the most popular Iranian websites. You see that a website called *jeegar* is on the top with over

100,000 visitors everyday. Its content: links to mainly soft porn material on the Net." Hoder suggests that he "noticed the huge impact of Jeegar.com when I discovered the hugest hike in my visitors ever as a result of a link on *Jeegar* to a post in my weblog about board games; over 4,000 visitors had come to my blog by a single link from *Jeegar* in two days and they keep coming." However, we would argue that the Islamic Republic has produced a cultural ecology that polices sexuality, so that holding hands in public has at

times been a dangerous activity, and that excises sexualized imagery from film and television, and thus has rendered much of social practice and more of viewing practice “pornography.” Thus Iranians searching out explicit sexual materials on the Internet are already part of a “field of politics,” whether they want to be overly resistant or not.<sup>18</sup> Iranian journalist and blogger Nabavi raises a similar concern in his article titled “60,000 Editors.”<sup>19</sup> According to Nabavi, of eighteen Iranian sites with more than ten thousand visitors per day, thirteen were about entertainment (or, as he calls them, “yellow sites,” a reference to tabloid media), three were about the Internet, two were about commerce, and only one was a news site. He suggests that as a result of the continuing pressure by the judiciary on media in Iran, many bloggers who write under their real names bypass politics and take refuge in their own private world and their individual concerns about literature, society, and culture. Of course, the central issue here is the definition and linking of the “political” to an interest in hard news and information and the attendant assumption that entertainment has no political implications. Yet in the context of a hegemonic state that has opinions about and acts in relation to most areas of social activity including those of gender relations and sexual expression, it is important to consider that searches for entertainment and for sites of freer sexual expression are in part engendered by these macro-level dynamics and are often seen by Internet users as small acts of defiance against the state.

However, while the sites have not remained the same, and new ones have replaced some old favorites, more overtly political sites linger in a relegation zone (if lucky) of the top league of Iranian sites. A close look at the latest statistics by the Nedstatbasic site for 18 May 2006 reveals that only two Iranian blogs by journalists appear in the list of top 150 Iranian sites.<sup>20</sup> Nourizadeh is ranked forty-second (up four places from the previous week), and Behnoudonline is ranked eighty-first (up seven places from the previous

week). Both site owners are well-known Iranian journalists based outside Iran with extensive networks and access to large numbers of sources, and both sites have between two thousand and three thousand visitors per day. Other popular blogs include [alipic.mihanblog.com](http://alipic.mihanblog.com) (99), a blog with nothing but photographs; [irjokes.blogspot.com](http://irjokes.blogspot.com) (111), which as the name suggests contains Persian jokes; [alpr.3omorgh.org](http://alpr.3omorgh.org) (131), containing political commentary; [shima.blogspot.com](http://shima.blogspot.com) (141), a personal diary of an Iranian girl in Tehran; [parastood.com](http://parastood.com) (148), a Web log in Persian and English combining political, cultural, and social commentary; and [bourse.blogfa.com](http://bourse.blogfa.com) (149), a blog dedicated to news and information about the Tehran stock exchange and linked to the company itself and its site, [tse.ir](http://tse.ir). None of the Iranian journalists inside Iran who has a blog made it into the top 150. According to the same statistics, while the reformist daily *Shargh* had remained the most popular site in the previous weeks with between fifteen thousand and twenty thousand page views per day, the rest of the list of popular sites is dominated by general entertainment-oriented sites, offering a mixture of music, sports news, and commercial services.

A good way of assessing the accuracy of Nedstatbasic data is to look at the information that it provides on other countries. The list of top U.K. sites for 18 May 2006 reveals the shortcomings and the inaccuracy of its data. It includes twelve adult sites in its top-fifty list, six football sites, and a number of game, entertainment, technology, and business sites. There are only two news sites. One, and the highest-ranking news site, is [lankaweb.com](http://lankaweb.com), containing news about Sri Lanka and ranked twenty-ninth; the other, [mathaba.net](http://mathaba.net), is an alternative world news site, ranked forty-fourth. If this is not indication enough of the data’s inaccuracy, one should consider the fact that Stevenage football club site is ranked fiftieth. News sites including the BBC are nowhere to be seen in the top fifty, one hundred, or two hundred. Surely it is inconceivable to imagine that the site for Stevenage (a nonleague

18. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993).

19. Ebrahim Nabavi, “60,000 Editors,” BBC Persian, [www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2004/11/printable/041115\\_mj-en-iran-web-log-anniv.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2004/11/printable/041115_mj-en-iran-web-log-anniv.shtml) (accessed 12 February 2006).

20. MotigoWebsite, [webstats.motigo.com/catalogue/top1000?id=1255303&country=IR](http://webstats.motigo.com/catalogue/top1000?id=1255303&country=IR) (accessed 12 April 2006).



football club) has more visitors than the BBC or, if we remain in the “infotainment” category, than BBC Sports or the Chelsea, Liverpool, Arsenal, and Manchester United Web sites.

Another source, Alexa.com, presents a rather different picture of the Internet in Iran. This site, which measures sites and their rank on three months of aggregated historical traffic data from millions of Alexa Toolbar users, combines page views and users (reach). According to its figures for May 2006 the ten most popular sites in Persian are Blogfa; PersianBlog; BBC Persian; Mehrnews; the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA); Baztab (another news site); alshia.com (a religious site providing religious information, documents, and discussion in twenty-six languages including Persian, English, French, Italian, Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish, Azari, and Bengali); the Iran Student News Agency (ISNA); Fars (another Internet news site, claiming to be the first independent news agency in Iran); and pzoworld.com, a site that is dedicated to computing and the Internet. Alexa computes site traffic at the domain level, and the reason two Iranian blog service providers (Blogfa and PersianBlog) are ranked first and second, respectively, is because all blogs carrying their domain are treated as part of the same site. It is not an indication of the popularity of a blog as an individual site. The most popular entertainment site listed by Alexa.com is Niksalehi.com (ranked eighteenth), a site created by Mohammed Niksalehi, a final-year undergraduate student majoring in electronics in Mashhad. This site contains games, trivia, horoscopes, and so on. The top-ranking blog (ranked fifty-seventh) is webneveshteha.com, written by mid-ranking cleric Mohammad Ali Abtahi, a former vice president under Khatami. This site is followed by parastood.com (ranked eighty-second) and kosoof.com, a photoblog by Arash Ashoorinia (ranked eighty-seventh). Undoubtedly, Alexa's method does not provide an accurate picture of the popularity of blogs as related to each individual blog. It is conceivable that there are more popular blogs that have been lost under the aggregate system of counting them as part

of the same domain. Nevertheless it points out, in contrast to Nedstatbasic, that news sites in Persian, including those operated and maintained outside Iran (such as BBC Persian, the U.S.-financed Radio Farda, Voice of America, and a number of other news sites) are among the most popular sites.

One needs to treat all Internet statistics with caution. While such statistics might aid certain perceptions of the notion of “public” purely in terms of news and journalism and enable some commentators to seek closure of the debate with some well-intended judgments, one needs to open up investigation further and check and crosscheck existing data and surveys. Even if such figures were accurate, which they are not, one still needs to be able to explain why things are the way they are, how they arrived at this point, and what they tell (or, more important, fail to tell) about Iran. These are crucial questions in the context of Iran, where everything from attending football matches, following dress codes, talking to the opposite sex, or watching purely entertainment-oriented satellite channels can become a public concern and therefore political. By this, of course, we do not imply that all forms of political expression are the same or of equal significance. One can appreciate that the politics of a world cup match between Iran and the United States is not as significant as the current international confrontation between the two countries over nuclear issues. Nor would we wish to argue that watching pornography is always a political act (sometimes a cigar is a cigar and a naked woman just that), but in a context where the boundaries of public taste and morality are so heavily and literally policed, refusals to accept those definitions can take on political meanings. Our argument is that we need to move beyond the narrow sense by which the political/public has been defined, explored, and investigated, particularly by Iranian commentators themselves.

The growth of blogging has also shifted the attention of many young users from chat rooms toward reading and writing Web logs.<sup>21</sup> Iranians have had a visible presence in major

21. See Hossein Drakhshan's “Three Years of Iranian Blogs,” BBC Persian, [www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2004/11/printable/041110\\_mj-hd-web-log-anniv.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2004/11/printable/041110_mj-hd-web-log-anniv.shtml) (12 February 2006).

chat rooms such as Yahoo Messenger and on many Persian chat sites. These remain popular, and many political and social groups organize regular meetings in Paltalk.<sup>22</sup> However, Web logs have created a new platform for establishing contacts, networks, and public spaces. Various Web sites have emerged that link to one another, creating a chain effect, with different kinds of sponsors and spaces for product placement. E-zines such as Cappuccinomag.com are also increasingly popular, attracting more than fifty thousand visitors per month.

Web log content and functions vary and attract different readers. They have certainly increased the volume of Persian content in cyberspace and have readdressed the imbalance of content in terms of the language. Many Iranian bloggers have opted for bilingual blogs, and many write only in English (perhaps to appeal to a wider audience or because they lack skills in written Persian, or both), but the majority of blogs by Iranians inside and outside of Iran are written in Persian. The available data suggest that 60 percent of visitors to popular Web logs come from inside Iran, with the rest logging in from North America, Europe, or Asia.

#### Formal and State Politics on the Net

It is not only “oppositional” politics of various kinds that find a presence in the Persian blogosphere. Some parts of the regime have actively embraced e-development so that the Islamic Republic has a large presence online. Some of the formal politics of the regime has migrated to the Web, with a great many government departments posting public statistics and other materials, while some government officials have also started their own blogs. One of the best known and celebrated of such blogs is *webneveshteha.com*, written by Mohammad Ali Abtahi, one of Iran’s six vice presidents during Khatami’s

presidency. Launched in September 2003, his site became an instant hit. He quickly launched an English site, which receives fifteen thousand visitors a day, and later added an Arabic version. He announced his arrival by posting a message: “I am here as well!!!”

Abtahi’s site consists of daily articles and diaries, well-kept and extensive archives, articles about him in other media, interviews, and photographs. He pokes fun at himself, the government, friends, and especially his conservative rivals (one photograph shows a leading conservative journalist picking his nose). Proud of his latest mobile phone, he uses it to take pictures of his colleagues in informal situations and of his trips abroad, including to Venice. He writes commentary on cultural issues, including the controversial movie *The Lizard*, and regularly criticizes any crackdown on Web logs and the Internet. Indeed, from early on, the Internet in general and Web logs in particular have been regarded as so influential that the government could no longer ignore them and actually began to endorse them. They played a key role in the 2005 elections, with all the candidates having their own dedicated site/blog. Many religious institutions and agencies have deemed it necessary to establish an online presence. A report by Mehdi Khalji in August 2005 went as far as calling the holy city of Qom the “IT Capital of Iran.”<sup>23</sup>

#### Individual Space or Community Construction?

Abtahi’s blog is one of the few to contain no links to other bloggers, which raises an interesting question about whether blogs are simply individualized phenomena or part of a wider collective process. Much of the brouhaha about blogging in the West focuses on the massive desire for individual expression and global presentation of self that would have given Erving Goffman sleepless nights;<sup>24</sup> yet even these are increasingly

22. A meeting organized by *womeniniran.net* to celebrate International Women’s Day on 8 March 2004 attracted a large number of Iranian journalists, academics, and activists from inside and outside of the country. Participants included secular feminist activists inside and outside Iran as well as the granddaughter of Ayatollah Khomeini, Zahra Eshraghi.

23. Mehdi Khalji, “Qum: Computer Capital of Iran,” BBC Persian, [www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2005/08/050802\\_mj-mkhalaji-internet-qom.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2005/08/050802_mj-mkhalaji-internet-qom.shtml) (accessed 12 February 2006). Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has also joined the long list of officials with their own blogs: [www.ahmadinejad.ir](http://www.ahmadinejad.ir).

24. Erving Goffman’s work examined the presentation of self in everyday life and he was deeply fascinated by the idea of “face work.” See Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959).

hosted by major Web log providers, and many contain more links than material to produce a more evident collective phenomenon.<sup>25</sup>

Undoubtedly, many Persian blogs are individual centered and express the aspirations, thoughts, and sentiments of individual bloggers. Hossein Drakhshan's aptly named blog, *Editor: Myself*, indicates the importance of an individual taking control over content and finding his own voice, free of editors (although, it could be said that there are almost as many "editors" as there are bloggers). Many blogs are locations for the presentation of individual lives, with family photos, love poems, laments about failed relationships, whimsy and wit, and all the accoutrements of bourgeois individualism that are to be found on British or American blogger sites. Much of this is quite simply documented in Nasrin Alavi's book on Iranian blogging, *We Are Iran*.<sup>26</sup> But even the least popular blogs are no longer about individuals as such, since even the most private and anonymous blogs have become part of a wider community of interests through the addition—and the significance—of links. Increasingly there is a clear and visible sense of connections and networks among Persian bloggers, and trends are moving toward establishing a sense of solidarity, camaraderie, and belonging. Thus, while Web logs are one of the most individual and private forms of expression in public space, there are visible trends toward collective efforts not only in producing a Web log but also in creating networks through linkages of friends, professional colleagues, sympathizers, and other relevant blogs and sites.

One site, [tahsilat.webialist.com](http://tahsilat.webialist.com), was created in order to introduce student blogs and has compiled a list of more than seven hundred Web logs written and maintained by students. A feminist site, [womeniniran.net](http://womeniniran.net), provides a rich list of more than one hundred women bloggers in Iran, some of whom are producing powerful critical observations on public life in Iran. This site has added a new section, "From Web Logs," and in addition to existing links has announced

that it will provide links to any posted materials on blogs that deal with women's issues. It aims to provide a platform for wider coverage of "individual and independent voices" as well as contributing to the diversity and richness of the *womeniniran* site.

Creating collective blogs has become so popular that Web log service providers have announced that as part of their services, they will cater to bloggers who intend to work as a group. Defining "collective" blogs, however, is as difficult as defining the blog itself. This process is evolving, and the movement just beginning to take shape is important to watch as it develops. Undoubtedly, and as Ali Asghar Saied-Abadi, a founder of the collective blog [hanouz.com](http://hanouz.com), has suggested, a key feature of collective blogs is their speed in updating the blog and presenting new materials and postings.<sup>27</sup> Providing relevant information and analysis on a regular basis is a daunting task for individual bloggers, especially for those with full-time jobs outside the blogosphere. Most Web log service providers terminate their services to bloggers if they fail to update, and usually "auction" the space to new clients. A collective blog relies on the commitment of more than one individual, who not only keep the blog running and lively but, by so doing, help maintain its visitors.

But collective blogs are more than just a pragmatic and practical solution to avoid losing visitors and Web space. They provide a platform for more diverse sets of arguments, opinions, and analyses. This feature, as Saied-Abadi suggests, creates circles that can open up spaces for dialogues between bloggers and their readers. The highly individualized Iranian blogosphere has been the target of serious criticism. Daruish Ashuri, a well-known Iranian writer, has argued (somewhat ironically, it must be said, by posting on his own blog) that the volume of bad, rushed, and ill-conceived opinions and ideas that are posted on thousands of blogs can be regarded as nothing but a sad waste of the time, energy, and intellectual abilities of many young

25. A much-celebrated Persian blog ([z8un.com](http://z8un.com)) has listed more than 350 blogs/sites under the title *dostan* (friends).

26. Nasrin Alavi, *We Are Iran* (Washington, DC: Soft Skull Press, 2005).

27. Ali Asghar Saied-Abadi, "Collective Blogs: Starting Circles of Dialogue," BBC Persian, [www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2004/11/041114\\_mj-asa-iran-web-logs-anniv.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2004/11/041114_mj-asa-iran-web-logs-anniv.shtml) (accessed 12 February 2006).

Iranians.<sup>28</sup> He argues that this is especially dangerous for a nation that needs to produce its own knowledge and develop its own ideas. Ashuri's own site is part of another circle, Halgheh Malakut ([www.malakut.org](http://www.malakut.org)), which describes itself as "a collection of Web logs with diverse identity intended to produce critique, dialogue, and friendship." It also describes itself as a decentralized network where the only conditions of membership are accepting the rights and freedom of individuals and respecting pluralism and freedom of speech. Currently this circle contains thirty-nine individual blogs, including a few in English.

### Categories of Collective Blogs

Undoubtedly one factor that contributed to a surge in the number of collective blogs was the closure of many reformist newspapers.<sup>29</sup> Many journalists who had lost their jobs began to create or write for blogs.

We can identify a number of different trends among collective blogs. One is an effort to gather a number of blogs under the same umbrella, creating networks of individual bloggers with diverse views who are willing to express their commitments to certain aims and conditions. Malakut.org is a good example of this trend, where thirty-nine individual bloggers (and possibly even more in the future) see themselves as part of this loosely defined circle. The site itself provides no postings, and the only general information is related to the conditions of membership and the required conditions and etiquette for writing. There are also no links except for the list of all the individual bloggers who use the *malakut* domain name.

Similarly, debsh.com, a home page of ten regular blogs, is the brainchild of a number of Iranian journalists (including some writing for the reformist daily *Shargh*), researchers, and a photographer. The site claims that it formed on the basis of the acceptance of differences of opinion. Bloggers on this site are asked to observe and uphold two principles. One is to abide by the law and the "red lines" of the Islamic

Republic (since all the managers and bloggers live in Iran), to manage the site from inside and have "no interests in creating problems for themselves or family and friends." The second, not irrelevant to the first, is "to avoid over-politicization and marginal issues." The site claims that all members have agreed to avoid producing constant political materials, although this does not prevent them from occasional engagements with political matters.<sup>30</sup> This seems to be an obligatory "disclaimer" by a number of Iranian sites, and one cannot take it seriously, not least in the case of debsh.com. One blog member's recent posting (by Mahmud Farjami), for example, contains a note on the meaning of Khordad and how it brings a bitter smile to his face.<sup>31</sup> There is an item on the government's policy for collecting beggars from the streets of Tehran and how the same methods have been used on intellectuals, making a direct reference to the then recent arrest of the Iranian scholar Ramin Jahanbegloo. Two readable and satirical items are letters supposedly written by Pope Benedict XVI and George Bush in response to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's recent letter to the U.S. president. The first one contains some fascinating passages, and as one reads closer to the end of the letter, the language becomes more friendly as the pope refers to Ahmadinejad as "Dear Mahmoud, My Son," and declares, "I'll die for you (*fadat sham*)!" The letter from Bush also raises some very important questions wrapped in humor. In one passage the blog says that Bush was very happy to receive the letter:

Dear President, I think that, leaving aside the current situation and public opinion in Tehran and Washington, me and you think similarly about a number of issues. For example you are worried about us turning Iraq back fifty years, and we are worried that you might turn Iran back fifty years too! You are worried that we might take hundreds of millions of dollars from other countries and spend it on our unnecessary needs, and we are worried that you might take hundreds of millions of your own country's reserves and spend it on the irrelevant needs of

28. Daruish Ashuri's Web log, [ashouri.malakut.org/archives/005873.shtml](http://ashouri.malakut.org/archives/005873.shtml) (accessed 13 July 2007).

29. Gholam Khiabany and Annabelle Sreberny, "The Iranian Press and the Continuing Struggle over Civil Society, 1998–2000," *Gazette* 62 (2001): 203–23.

30. "For A Constitution," Debsh, [debsh.com/rule](http://debsh.com/rule) (12 April 2006).

31. Khatami's first landslide victory came on 2 Khordad (23 May 1997).



others! For example, you have asked me why there is such widespread objection to a referendum, and I'm asking you why there is widespread objection to a referendum. But you ask a president of the United States about a referendum in Palestine, while I am asking an Iranian president about a referendum in Iran.<sup>32</sup>

This blog provides links to a number of Iranian and foreign sites.

Doxdo.com, another loosely defined collective blog/site, describes itself as an "online news reader." It acts as a newsletter, providing the latest news and information posted on a number of Web sites and blogs. Launched in September 2005, it allows users to search the content of all blogs or sites as well as all the information and links posted on doxdo.com. There is no specific editorial policy and no overall control over the content of individual postings. Blogs and sites can join if they have more than fifty visitors per day, are introduced and recommended by an existing member, or introduce five Web logs with fifty readers. Currently more than two hundred sites' blogs are members of this network, which provides quick access to news and information as reported in the Iranian blogosphere.

The above blogs are indeed created as an amalgamation of a number of individual blogs and have no particularly defined aims; they do cover a wide variety of concerns and issues as expressed by individual members, resembling a neighborhood or community of individual households. The main reason they are brought together is by virtue of their being located in the same space (traffic).

If such collective blogs act as a network and maximize traffic to a site, there are others that have more focused aims and objectives and are organized around a more tightly defined subject. Blogsports.net is a collective blog that is dedicated to sport and recently launched a special page (fifaworldcup2006.blogsports.net/) dedicated entirely to World Cup 2006, with links to related and relevant stories and reports. Weblog.eprsoft.com is another specialist collective blog dedicated to mass communica-

tions. Seven regular writers contribute to this blog, of which only Hossein Emami (pr.eprsoft.com) and Ali Mazinani (mazin.eprsoft.com) share the domain name eprsoft.com. Launched on 18 May 2004, this blog is an attempt to offer specialized knowledge, comments, and analysis of wider trends in mass communications and public relations.

Another specialist collective Web log is haftan.com, a popular "station" dedicated to the arts and presenting postings under fourteen different sections including literary criticism, film and television, visual art, translation, photography, the Internet, and other media. Membership to this site, launched in August 2005, is free. Saeidreza Shokrolahai, who has his own individual blog (khabgard.com), is haftan.com's founder, and a number of volunteers, again each with his or her own blog, help to maintain and design this site. Daruish Mohamadpour, a member of the malakut.com circle, is also involved in this network.

Running a collective blog has its problems, however. Fanus.blogspot.com, the brainchild of Parsa Saaebi (not a real name), was launched in July 2002 and gradually turned into a collective blog as Parsa invited friends to write and maintain it. But there are reports of internal conflicts and difficulties inside the group. A report on the Gooya news site asks, "Do not let *fanus* [the lantern] go out," stating that "their yellow flame has turned blue, which is cleaner but not more natural."<sup>33</sup> It seems the bloggers' commitment to their studies had acted as a major obstacle to improving the quality of their writing, despite the rapid increase in the number of visitors. They had failed, despite having more than ten contributors, who updated their blogs on a regular basis. Parsa Saaebi, however, sheds a different light on the difficulties that collective blogs face. In an interview with another Iranian blogger (Asad Alimohammdi, who is regarded as the Larry King of the blogistan), he argues that working as part of the team of a collective blog is not as easy as it seems: "The expectation of a collective blog is high. If anything happens

32. Farjami.debsh.com (accessed 12 April 2006).

33. M. Sokhan, "Don't Let Fanus Go Out," news.gooya.eu/politics/archives/047389.php (accessed 12 April 2006).



everyone expects that the collective blog should express an opinion. If anyone is insulted, all are waiting for a reaction from collective blogs."<sup>34</sup> Parsa suggests that because of these expectations, collective blogs are in constant need of new and quality materials and that individual bloggers cannot be themselves because they have to be formal and have to address officials. Fanus is still surviving, despite having lost a number of contributors, but Parsa sees a conflict between the need for sustained collective effort and teamwork of collective blogs and the inherently individualized nature of blogs.

Another significant collective blog is herlandmag.com/weblog. This blog clearly highlights the complexity, aspirations, and multidimensionality of many online initiatives in Iran. The Association of Lively Women (Anjoman-e Zanan-e Zنده), part of a network that includes nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the media, political activists, and so on, came about as a result of many years of campaigning by a number of Iranian feminists. It is the Web log of an Iranian NGO called Women's Cultural Center (Markaz-e Farhangi-e Zanan). Launched in March 2000 and officially registered as an NGO in July of that year, it was a response to the urgent need for more organized efforts by secular feminists. The two people behind the initial effort were Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, director of the publishing house Nashr-e Towseh, and Shahla Lahiji, another independent publisher behind Roshangaran (The Enlighteners).<sup>35</sup> The center announced its arrival onto the political scene after organizing an event to celebrate International Women's Day in 2000. The aim was to "learn from our experience; become aware of the 'perceived natural' situation used and reproduced against women; spread and expand feminist knowledge among ourselves and other women; to look at our issues critically and not from an individual perspective, but as public and social issues; and strengthen ourselves via our collective efforts to transform unequal situation which grip us."<sup>36</sup> Activities of the center

in the past few years have included organizing a petition and campaign for Iran to join the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); regular meetings, seminars, gatherings, and workshops focusing on a range of issues such as Afghan women in exile, the killing of street women, violence against women, the impact of war on women, solidarity with Palestinian women, women workers in Iran, and objection to the antiwomen policies of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB); and publishing an internal bulletin, *Nameh Zan (Woman's Letter)*. The center launched its site Feminist Tribune in 2003, which after nearly two years was "filtered" by the Iranian regime in November 2005, but after a few months resumed its work.<sup>37</sup> In March 2006 the center announced the launch of its second online publication (*Nashriah*) in its continuing effort to forge much stronger links between women activists inside and outside the country. This second site, Zanestan ([www.herlandmag.com](http://www.herlandmag.com)), which introduces itself as the first online Persian publication for women, has so far published six issues covering a diverse range of topics, with regular updates, polemics, statistics, news, and analysis. The site's Web log was launched on 6 March 2006 to provide additional space for regular and quicker interventions. Ahmadi Khorasani, in the first posting, jokingly blamed Farnaaz (a feminist blogger) for getting them into the mess of collective blogs.<sup>38</sup> She continued by saying that if the Iranian state wants to have nuclear energy, then why should not women? "For this reason, I, one of the members of *alam nesvan* (world of women) demand the establishment of an independent nuclear site for the independent women's movement; this is 'our absolute right' and one of our demands. Now even if our case goes well in various agencies and councils, and, God willing, passes all different stages in good health, perhaps our slogan for next year might be: For every Iranian woman one centrifuge, for the enrichment of equal gender relations!"

34. Parsa Saaebi, interview with Asad Alimohammdi, "Collective Blogs Have Not Managed to Find Their Place in Blogistan," Weblog Billy and I, [mebaily.com/archives/001268.html](http://mebaily.com/archives/001268.html) (accessed 12 April 2006); Ashpazbaashi, "To the Last Breath," [ashpazbaashi.blogspot.com/2006/04/blog-post.html](http://ashpazbaashi.blogspot.com/2006/04/blog-post.html) (accessed 12 April 2006).

35. See Gholam Khiabany and Annabelle Sreberny, "The Women's Press in Iran: Engendering the Public Sphere," in *Women and Media in the Middle East*, ed. N. Sakr (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 15–38.

36. "About Us," Women's Cultural Center, [herlandmag.com/about](http://herlandmag.com/about) (accessed 12 May 2006).

37. Feminist Tribune, [www.iftribune.com](http://www.iftribune.com).

38. Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, [herlandmag.com/weblog/06/03](http://herlandmag.com/weblog/06/03) (accessed 12 May 2006). See Farnaaz, [farnaaz.com](http://farnaaz.com) (accessed 12 May 2006).

Collective blogs (such as those mentioned as well as others, including *sobhaneh.net*, *hanouz.com*, and *cappuccinomag.com*) highlight a specific trend in online media. But, as we have seen, such blogs take different shapes and forms and cannot be separated from the broader conditions paving the way for their emergence. Establishing collective blogs in many parts of the world has resulted from a surge of interest in blogging and as a way of building on the strength of an already-existing commercial media “brand,” exemplified in the new initiative *Commentisfree* by the British newspaper the *Guardian*. However, in Iran collective blogs have often emerged as a substitute for other kinds of (political) activity. The Islamic Republic dominates the press, controls broadcasting, and even configures NGO/civil society activities so that running an independent media channel carries more than financial risk and attempting to develop autonomous political organizations is a highly precarious activity. Thus many print newspapers have morphed into collective Web sites when titles have been closed by the regime. For example, in September 2004, after the closure of the reformist newspapers *Emrooz*, *Rooydad*, and *Baamdad*, they reappeared in Web log format (*emrooznews.blogspot.com*, *rooydadnews.blogspot.com*, and *baamdadnews.blogspot.com*). The virtual NGO sector might be less imbricated with state policy than the “real” one (“might be,” since this issue needs careful analysis).

### Solidarity/Collective Action

These virtual spaces often become important cyber meeting places for activists and intellectuals in Iran and for the various Iranian oppositions abroad. The Internet has offered Iranian activists in Iran alternative news channels in addition to much needed international support and solidarity, including that of Iranians living in exile. In response to the government’s crackdown on reformists’ sites that were recently launched to continue their work after the closure of their newspapers, Hossein Derakhshan posted a message in October 2004 calling on

Iranian bloggers to publish contents from the reformist sites and to display *Emrooz* as the title of their Web log in order to express their solidarity and to highlight censorship in Iran.<sup>39</sup> This move generated a storm of publicity in Iran and was heavily criticized by conservative newspapers such as the daily *Joumhuri-e Eslami*.

Other acts of solidarity have included a petition for the immediate release of Sina Motallebi, a well-known Iranian blogger ([www.rooznegar.com](http://www.rooznegar.com)) who was arrested on 20 April 2003. Motallebi, a film critic who had worked for reformist dailies such as *Ham-mihan* and *Hayat-e-No*, launched his blog under his real name. Problems with the “content of his site” and “interview with foreign press” were the reasons given for his arrest. But as Pedram Moallemian, who came up with the idea of the petition, suggests, Motallebi’s arrest had no clear rationale. “His last few posts before being summoned were (in order) about an Iranian newscaster’s inability to pronounce names properly; the retirement of the ‘superhuman Champion’ Michael Jordan; his son’s teething problems; and a reprint of an already published statement by Kambiz Kaheh, another film critic arrested on bogus charges of distributing illegal videos. Hardly risky materials.”<sup>40</sup> The petition to free Sina Motallebi was quickly supported by more than four thousand signatures; it attracted publicity and banners across a number of sites and blogs and even the BBC covered the story.<sup>41</sup> He was released but soon moved to Holland and by 2006 was actually working for BBC Persian in London.<sup>42</sup>

Another noticeable and more practical achievement of solidarity and collective action was the ability of bloggers to raise an estimated \$4 million after the Bam earthquake tragedy.

Another example of collective action is the posting of a logo by large numbers of Web logs in objection to the banning of the word *women* as a search item. In 2005, presumably concerned about the increasing use of the Internet to access pornography, the Islamic Republic tried to ban *women* as a search word. Since many Iranian still use prepaid cards to access the In-

39. See Masoud Behnoud’s report, “Symbolic Action of Persian Bloggers,” BBC Persian, [www.bbc.co.uk/persian/interactivity/debate/story/2004/09/040920\\_h\\_emrooz.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/interactivity/debate/story/2004/09/040920_h_emrooz.shtml) (accessed 12 October 2006).

40. Pedram Moallemian, “Not about Sina,” [www.eyeranian.net/archives/000021.html](http://www.eyeranian.net/archives/000021.html) (accessed 26 March 2006).

41. Petition to free Sina Motallebi, [www.petitiononline.com/sina](http://www.petitiononline.com/sina) (accessed 26 March 2006).

42. Mark Glaser, “Weblogs Unite to Protest Detained Iranian Blogger,” [www.ojr.org/ojr/glaser/1051148901.php](http://www.ojr.org/ojr/glaser/1051148901.php) (accessed 26 March 2006).

ternet, the cards were designed so that using search engines such as Google for the term *women* was impossible. This action triggered an immediate campaign across a large number of Web logs and involved the posting of a specially designed logo. The logo consisted of a bright yellow triangular traffic sign with a large exclamation mark and the image of the head of an uncovered woman peeping out from behind the sign. The tagline read, “Women. Still Censored!”<sup>43</sup> The campaign has been supported by large numbers of bloggers, and the employed slogan has been, “Censorship is indecent, not women.”

Another example of collective action was the quick response of Iranian communities to the May 2006 arrest of Ramin Jahanbegloo, a prominent Iranian political philosopher who holds the Rajni Kothari Chair in Democracy at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in Delhi, India, and is head of the department of contemporary thought in the Cultural Research Bureau (CRB) in Tehran. In addition to a widespread campaign and activities and petitions against his arrest, two dedicated blogs emerged focusing exclusively on his case and the campaign for his release. One of these blogs is edited by Hossein Derakhshan, already mentioned, and Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, who is a professor of history and Near and Middle Eastern civilization at the University of Toronto and the editor of *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*.<sup>44</sup> Both editors of this blog were based in Toronto, where Jahanbegloo worked and lived for a number of years. Behzad Homayoonpoor Shirazy has also launched a blog dedicated to the campaign for Jahanbegloo’s release.<sup>45</sup> Jahanbegloo was released in August 2006. Previously, similar campaigns and blogs were launched to free Akbar Ganji, an Iranian journalist, whom the regime did release in spring 2006.<sup>46</sup> There is even the Association of Iranian Bloggers (penblog), which is campaign-

ing for the freedom of blogging and against any repressive measures for Internet activity.<sup>47</sup> This association has its own constitution and around two hundred members and is structured like a formal political party, with six subcommittees including the women’s committee, communiqué committee, social committee, refugees committee, publication committee, and membership committee.

It is evident that context produces different cultural politics and thus the interactions of Iran-based activists/bloggers with those in the Iranian diaspora have not always been and will not be without friction. Yet one of the great potentials of the Internet and of various forms of collective blogging is to blur the boundary between the inside and the outside of national space and allow more encounter between the Iranian internal and external oppositions and their distinct “intellectual avant-gardes.”

### Conclusion

This article has explored the reasons for the rapid emergence of a Persian blogosphere, its connection to wider communications development in Iran, and the nature of its content, particularly its broad involvement with the political that encompasses both private and public, formal and informal, individual and collective voices.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the lack of artistic expression was explained by the lack of things to fight against. Conversely, the emergence of a highly politicized Persian blogosphere is evidence of the wide range of issues—social, cultural, and those more overtly or formally political—that have been politicized within the Islamic Republic. Not only is there much to discuss, but there are many new ways for discussion to be staged. When the Islamic Republic controls the press, journalists find other voices and new Web sites open; when it censors film, directors become more adept at

43. See the logo on the Association Without Borders site, [www.bedoonemarz.com/blog/87](http://www.bedoonemarz.com/blog/87) (accessed 15 March 2006).

44. See [raminj.iranianstudies.ca](http://raminj.iranianstudies.ca) (accessed 15 March 2006).

45. See [releaseraminjahanbegloo.blogspot.com](http://releaseraminjahanbegloo.blogspot.com) (accessed 20 May 2006).

46. See [en-democratiranian.blogspot.com](http://en-democratiranian.blogspot.com) (accessed 20 May 2006); and [releaseganji.net](http://releaseganji.net) (accessed 20 May 2006).

47. Association of Iranian Bloggers, [penlog.blogspot.com](http://penlog.blogspot.com) (accessed 20 May 2006).

negotiating the limits of expression; and when the president goes online, perhaps it becomes harder to censor, certainly harder to control, the Internet.

While a poet in English *might* just be a poet, a poet in Persian is most probably writing between the lines, evading the censor, and pushing the boundaries of publicly acceptable expression. A woman blogging about fashion in the West *might* be doing just that; a woman discussing the constrictions of *hejab* under the Islamic Republic is raising questions about the reach of public politics into the private domain. Without pushing these differences too far—that is, without denying the politics of blogging in the West and the desire sometimes for mere entertainment in Iran—and reproducing rigid stereotypes, our argument centers on the importance of contextualizing blogging in Iran within the broader sociopolitical and cultural context of the Islamic Republic. This is not just a phenomenon of access to new technologies, although it is obviously that. This is not just young people enjoying Internet chats, although there is that too. This is about the construction of a public space for debate about and definition of the political that escapes and evades—however tenuously—the control of the regime. This is about the practice of and continuation of politics by other, many, and new means, inside and outside the country. §