Civil Society and Iranian Bloggers: Reconsidering the Democratizing Effects of ICTs.

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ABSTRACT

Internet usage and blogging have increased rapidly in Iran during the last years, despite the Iranian governments hard-line politics against oppositional voices. This study takes a closer look at the Iranian blogosphere through 11 in-depth interviews with bloggers from Tehran and Esfahan, as well as through analyzing the textual output of said bloggers. The purpose is to critically investigate the relationship between diffusion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the strengthening of the civil society in contemporary Iran. The study finds that there are very few activities that can be considered to have direct impact on democratization. There are no attempts among the interviewees to organize politically, because of the massive efforts from the Iranian government to censor people, filter websites and generally control the use of ICTs.

Keywords: Internet * Blogs * Iran * Public Sphere * Civil Society * ICT

INTRODUCTION

Internet growth has been phenomenal in Iran during the first years of this century. Common figures of usage from the year 2001 were around 1 million users, compared to 5 million users in 2005 (CIA 2006, ONI 2005, EIU 2005) and 7 million in 2006 (Freedom House 2006). *Telecommunications Company of Iran* estimated in 2005 (ONI 2005) that the number of Internet users would reach 25 million in 2009. The growth in Iranian Internet users between the year 2000 and 2007 is estimated to 2,900%, which is the highest in the Middle-East region, except for Syria (at 3,566%) (Miniwatts Marketing Group 2007[1]).

Also, Iran has experienced a remarkable increase in the number of blogs. Research shows that there was, in October 2005, around 100 million blogs in the world, with around 700,000 in Iran alone (Riley 2005). It should be noted that the numbers from Iran do not necessarily denote active blogs since it is the sum of the number of created blogs at the various Iranian blog hosts[2]. It is estimated that the number of *active* Iranian blogs at the time was between 40,000 to 110,000.

During the last decades, there has been a conventional wisdom that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) come with a strong democratizing power to dramatically change and eventually bring down authoritarian regimes. The advance-

ment of ICTs has been discussed in political circles for decades as a means to change the outset for political evolution. Often, a very optimistic view is heard from world-leaders and journalists, who believe that the Internet will lead to a salvation for, among others, the democracy-starved third world. Others mean that this view is simplistic and that there is no empirical evidence to support such claims; authoritarian states have ways of controlling and suppressing dissent wherever it appears, and have quickly learned to control all new communication technologies as they emerge – even in digital forms. (Kalathil & Boas 2003).

Iran is a country where the government tightly controls its citizens, and although democracy is inherently difficult to measure (Landman 2007:4) the country receives a Freedom House score of 6 out of 7, with 7 being complete lack of freedoms (Freedom House 2007). It also maintains a lot of control over the traditional media and government censorship affects all those who attempt to voice an opinion and participate in the public debate (ONI 2005). However, entirely new categories of people have become involved in the vibrant public sphere made possible by the adoption of ICTs, and the content they produce could possibly challenge the ideas of the traditional political debate that used to be available only to a few hand-picked elites. History shows that technological shifts promote and go hand in hand with social and structural changes in a society. In Iran, the introduction and acceptance of the audio cassette is usually considered paramount for the 1979 Islamic revolution to gain momentum enough to overthrow the Shah (Eickelman & Anderson 1999).

But the question is if the Iranian government might have realized this danger and can steer the use of Internet in a direction, though filtering and governmentally owned networks, to such a degree that it severely limits the possibilities of change. Bloggers are threatened and even jailed for their writings; their sites are censored and shut down (RSF 2006).

I aim, in this article, to investigate the relation between blogging and democratic change in contemporary Iran – a country with an appalling history when it comes to freedom of speech. My interest is focused on the possibility for the ICTs to be used as a means of achieving political change, and thus influence the future development in the country. Central to answering my questions are the study of non-elite participation in politics and the organization of civil society. I have for that reason made in-depth interviews, on location in Iran beginning in May of 2006, with Iranian bloggers, as well as analyzed what they write on their blogs. My purpose with the interviews was to study the bloggers themselves and their motivations for blogging, to investigate what got them started and what keeps them going. The purpose with the contextualization of the written material is to compare their output with the actions of the government and its counter-measures; Finally, I will assess to what extent the activity of bloggers in Iran can be seen as window of opportunity for structural change.

In concrete terms, I will attempt to provide answers to the following questions:

1. What are the bloggers' own motivations for participating in the online community?
2. Are there traces of politics in the textual output? Can the output help to evolve or influence the societal development and strengthen the civil society?
3. How can their actions be described in terms of challenging the current order and promote deeper democracy? What are the counter-reactions from the Iranian government to maintain *status quo*? How do they handle sensitive subjects and threats of filtering?

ICTS AND TECHNO-DEMOCRATIC DETERMINISM

Optimists take for granted that the introduction of communication technology leads to increased exchange of ideas and that mediation itself is constructive (Bohman 2004:47). This way of thinking can be seen in many aspects of society; not only in politics but also in the popular press and in the academic community. Critics say that researchers who claim technology provides an automatic path towards development and democratization display a mono-causal worldview, where the process often starts with the researcher describing the components of a new technology and its properties. Then, with the technology's importance established, the researcher extrapolates its potential over the whole of society. For instance, if the technology is claimed to be participatory, the analyst claims that the whole world will become less hierarchical, as is the case with the Internet. This would mean that impact of technology flows to development of the society (Wilson 2004:20).

This technological determinism, though, is not shared by everyone. Evidence shows (Kalathil & Boas 2003) that most regimes, desperate to retain *status quo* to ensure their own institutional survival, are indeed quite good at forming policies and plans to lessen the impacts of change – or at least the rate of the change. The powers of many of these governments are absolute, and they can successfully hinder development. It is also important to note that multi-national corporations play a surprisingly little part in the success of ICT projects, while national "ICT champions" who can inspire and make strong policies are of more importance. An active government with clear policies is thus crucial to any provide access to the Internet at all (Wilson 2004:391).

Governments build on a legacy of ICT control and in most countries where the Internet is now being repressed and controlled, the challenge to constrain use that is deemed dangerous or inappropriate, is a battle fought for a long time. The legacy of maintaining a grip of inter-personal communication often extends to everything from mass media to telecommunications and has been done for decades. Although the academic and scientific communities are often first to adapt Internet technology, the

state is usually the player who diffuse the technology into the broader population (Kalathil & Boas 2003:137). When doing so, they take their time to ensure that they remain in control over the infrastructure – and hence in executive control over the information that passes through the cables. Thus, links between structures and institutions play a determining role in the development of ICTs (Wilson 2004:391).

Many governments are not oblivious to the technological developments, and have devised national ICT plans in order to put the technology to good use – i.e. for their own purposes. The states plans, besides policies on the macro level, often include use for ICT in everything from e-services to propaganda (Kalathil & Boas 2003:139). One aspect of propaganda is that the state-run newspapers and television channels often take quite an active role on the web. These new channels are then used to fine-tune an ideological message to the general public, under the pretense of free expression. An Iranian example is the blog of President Ahmadinejad where he is perceived to talk directly to the people without middle-men.

The infrastructure is very complex and achieving effective access to ICTs is much harder than achieving formal access (Wilson 2004:391), which makes government involvement almost inevitable when it comes to wiring a country. This gives the government an opportunity to impose censorship on the data transmitted.

Authoritarian governments often use censorship or access control as a means to constrain politically sensitive or morally questionable material, in Iran's case, material ranging from Western political commentary to pornography, from getting to the general public. No measure to censor can be foolproof, and circumventing the firewalls can be quite easily done by web-savvy surfers. This however, is of less concern for the state in reality; the blocks are usually cumbersome enough to go around hindering mass spread of information. Another option for the regimes to remain in control is less technological: restrictions of physical access. These states often opt to nationwide intranets in an attempt to take advantage of the added efficiency of a networked society, while harnessing the dangers of the global free flow of information (Kalathil & Boas 2003:141). In the fall of 2006, as high-speed broadband connection became more and more common in urban Iranian homes, a new decree was suddenly presented. Effective immediately, no Internet access to private homes could be of higher speed than 128 kilobit per second[3]. Officially, the reason for this was to limit the influx of "immoral" influences from the non-Islamic world, primarily though file-sharing networks and sites like *YouTube* and *Google Video* (ONI 2006).

Previous research shows that citizens of countries where censorship is common often have a good understanding of what is acceptable use. The limits and the boundaries of society have been fed to them for decades. So, even without being physically hindered to access information or without mechanisms that prevent people from expressing themselves freely – in an absolute meaning of the word – people often know exactly how to act and what to say. (Kalathil & Boas 2003:142). Effective from 1 Jan-

uary 2007, all Iranian blogs were given a two-month's grace period to register with a governmental agency (*Samandehi*). Failure to do so might result in being blocked by the filters. Registration includes providing name and contact information. At this time, the information is not verified by a physical contract.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Ever since the early writings of de Tocqueville, political philosophers have made a distinction between different societal structures with regards to their relationship to the state (Kaldor 2003:19). The term "civil society" has evolved greatly in the last decades and there are a myriad of definitions. According to the London School of Economics (2004), the civil society is defined as the totality of the voluntary organizations in a country – free from (direct) influence from the state. This social sphere is considered to be beneficial for democracy since it organizes people in settings where they can express opinions and ideas without government involvement. Harvard professor Robert Putnam (1993) has widened the definition to also include more individual efforts, and stress that even non-political constellations of people are strengthening democratic values. He uses the term of *social capital* which is transferred into the political sphere and helps to hold society together – facilitating an understanding of the interconnectedness of society and interests within it.

Peter Dahlgren (1995:7) describes Jürgen Habermas' theory on the public sphere as where exchanges of information and important ideas are allowed to take place. The public sphere exists when citizens, exercising their rights to assemble and associate, meet in open forums to discuss current events, primarily political issues. Habermas suggests that the public sphere is signified by rational discussions and that these discussions have an implication on the surrounding society.

Scholars have criticized Habermas for his monolithic view on the public sphere. The general opinion has been that there have always been alternative or counter public spheres that question the mainstream hegemonic sphere and find another space where they can discuss an alternative agenda. This has been suggested in terms of class; what is called the "proletarian public sphere" by Oskar Negt & Alexander Kluge (1993) as a response to Habermas' bourgeois focus, and in terms of gender and feminism; by Nancy Fraser (1992). The belief that all forms of public expression can share the same space cannot withstand tests of pluralist modern society. The existence of such alternative public spheres is also central to when describing the Internet because of its plethora of uses by different groups (Dahlgren 2005:152).

Dahlgren (2005:148) conceptualizes the public sphere using three "dimensions". The structural dimension is the institutional features of the space. This includes the economic issues of ownership as well as legislative aspects. In terms of the Internet, this dimension is often comprised by legislation regarding access and censorship, but also

more mundane aspects such as social, economic, cultural, technical, and even Web-architectural features.

Representation is the output of the media is the second dimension; everything from mass media such as news programmes, to "minimedia" such as newsletters or small publications. Dahlgren notes that given the increasing "massification" of the contemporary Internet, questions on neutrality, fairness, accuracy, completeness, pluralism of views, agenda setting, ideological tendencies and modes of address, is just as important as with traditional media.

The third dimension is interaction, where Dahlgren points out that there are two aspects of this, the first being the interpretative process of receiving information and making sense of it. The second aspect is the possibility for the citizens to engage in a dialogue among themselves. This interaction can be anything from a person-to-person conversation to a large meeting, whether deliberative or not. The interesting thing with the Internet, Dahlgren notes, is that the boundaries of different modes are blurring. A conversation might just as well be with thousands of people as with one, and such conversations can be read by many – just like a traditional mass media.

An Islamic Space

When describing the history of the public sphere in Iran, it is impossible not to take under consideration the huge impact from the religious traditions in the region. Public dialogue has held a very special place in the Islamic world, in the sense that the discourse has mostly been crafted and controlled by the religious elite, and it lacks much of the historic traditions of public debate that was the foundation of Habermas' metaphorical bourgeoisie public sphere. In the Islamic world, much of the public debate have circled around religious matters, and the ordinary people were not allowed to participate in the process of interpretation, since this was reserved the '*ulama* – the religious scholars (Eickelman & Anderson 1999). Even though Iran cannot be directly compared, neither geographically or culturally, to the larger body of Arab states, some research can still provide a meaningful background to how the Islamic world has, thus far, related to developments in technology.

Historically the Middle-Eastern states have tried hard to put any new media technology into the service of this structure, for instance the access to printing presses and the distribution of newspapers. A more recent example is control over the mass media, with a monopolized broadcasting system to foster common, shared values and "modern" identities. This has forced any opposing voices to use alternative outlets, creating alternative public spheres beyond the officially sanctioned discourse. These alternative discourses are often also religious, but carry an oppositional interpretation not favored by the ruling class (Eickelman & Anderson 1999). Satellite television is illegal in Iran and owning a parabolic dish is prohibited. Still, possession of such dishes is very common, and most have no problems to access Western television

(Sreberny 2000). Several million satellite dishes are in operation in Iran (ONI 2005). The police do periodic raids and seize equipment, and the owner is harshly fined (Fathi 2006).

Dale Eickelman & Jon Anderson (1999) argue that the introduction of new media – meaning global telecommunications in general and the Internet in particular – has had two principal effects on the public discourse: First, they say, the asymmetry has changed as the lines between sender and receiver (producer and consumer) have blurred. More and more people participate in the religious and civil discourse. As such, new media is more participatory, and whether intended or not, it makes for a more diverse public sphere. Second, they say, the boundaries between public and private communication have changed. What was before a conversation between friends in the same geographical context, may now spread beyond national and cultural borders, and may be interpreted very differently. A message intended for one medium might carry entirely different connotations when interpreted in another country – or through another medium. As the Internet allows for anonymous communication between large bodies and groups of people, the conversations change and enter realms that were previously only possible between people who knew each other well. This changing rhetoric of norms transforms the social imaginary and the idea of the public (Warner 1992:378).

This has led to an enormous increase in civil pluralism in traditionally Muslim countries, where the authority of the *'ulama* has been contested (Anderson 1999). Some of the most important interpretations of Islam in the last decades have been done by men and women with little or no formal training in *fiqh*; the Islamic jurisprudence (Norton 1999:17).

Today's civil society in the Middle-East has often been described – at best – as fragmented and disperse, in opposition to what is believed to be needed to grow and sustain a viable pro-democracy movement (Said 1996). And it is believed that "weakness[es] of and division within civil society seem likely to be a major problem in the future process of democratization" (Bromley 1994:166). A lot of the groups that do exist are not after any democratic changes, but rather constellations opposing current – often leftist – regimes in the name of Islam. These military Islamite groups are considered to be very dangerous by the current regimes, and there are constant attempts to control or contain them (Haynes 2001:174, Halldén 2003, Pierret 2005).

Civil society groups that are concerned with democracy are often found within more secularized classes of society (Leftwich 1997), something that in most of the Middle Eastern countries are getting less and less common, as disillusioned youth find refuge in mosques in order to escape problems with an exploding rate of unemployment and dark hopes for the future (Gardell 2005:118). Iran's unemployment too – especially among young people – is excruciatingly high, with figures such as a 35% unemployment rate among young people. A group that is particularly hard-pressed is the re-

cently graduated academics. One of the reasons for this development is the Islamic Republic's pro-natalist campaign in the beginning of the nineteen-eighties, during the Iran/Iraq-war, to promote childbirth in order to create a twenty-million man revolutionary army (Amuzegar 2004). To get ahead of the competition, youths can join the Islamic *Basiji* militia, and get preferential treatment at universities and government positions (Kamangir 2007).

METHOD

The first part of this study is centered on the activities of 11 respondents who are active in the Iranian blogosphere. In-depth interviews were conducted during a two-month research trip to the cities of Tehran and Esfahan in Iran in the spring and early summer of 2006. The interviews were semi-structured (cf. Flic 2002) and involved questions on motivation, production and matters surrounding their daily life. Some of the interviewees I met with only once and interviewed for an hour or two in an informal setting such as a café or at the persons home. Others I spent considerable time with. They became key informants and provided me with access to other informants in the manner of a snowball sample. The ages spanned from 19 to 35 years and in the end, almost half of the interviewees turned out to be women.

The second part of the study is a contextualization of the interviews by looking at the textual output. Blog posts were translated from Persian for me upon returning to Sweden and were written by the same people that I interviewed. The posts were selected to have been posted at the approximate time that I was in Iran. I also looked at the blog in general: what links it had and how the comments interacted with the post.

Before I go into the analysis of the results, it might be interesting to dwell a few moments on the sample of interviewed bloggers and what potential influence it has on the results and its generalizablity. None of my interviewees can be said to represent an average Iranian in a socio-economic sense. Considering everyone I interviewed had either gone to – or presently attended – university, the level of education can be considered higher than the average. Also, most of them had a fairly good command of English, indicating both access to education and openness to the outside world.

Still, considering the complete lack of research in this field, I believe the results are interesting to reach a better understanding of the mechanisms of blogs in the Iranian context. It might also be interesting to note that, while the representativeness of my sample is low compared to all Iranians, it is much more representative of the blogging part of the population who display a fairly high level of education compared to the mass of the country (Halevi 2006).

MOTIVATIONS FOR PARTICIPATION

One of the most pressing questions I wanted to understand, with regards to my respondents' involvement, was why they chose to blog and how they related to their own writing and the issues they chose to blog about. Knowing this, it is possible to map and compare their motivations to theories of political participation. The answers to how it all got started were very diverse, and their relationship to their writing was just as individual. Most of the interviewees viewed their own blogging as non-political.

Omid, a 24-year-old student tells a typical story. At the beginning, he was mostly curious on how it worked, almost from a technical aspect. He told me he wanted to know what it was like after reading a newspaper article about Iranian blogging and how it could be done in Persian. He tried setting up his own server. But, as he started writing and got more in to it, he found that he received a lot of comments and appreciation by readers, and he saw the number of visitors to his blog increase quickly. Nisa, a 25-year-old student tells a similar story:

> I started blogging two years ago, after a friend showed me how to do. I was fascinated right off the bat. Sure, it was scary to put yourself out there, but at the same time it made me feel good.

Mehdi, a 35-year-old bank clerk with a vivid interest in poetry and literature says that he started blogging mostly to get his own poetry read by others and receive feedback in the form of comments.

> My poetry is my life. It is what I live for. The whole world can be found in a poem, and I enjoy the fact that others get to read my work.

Miryam, a 25-year-old student, tells yet another similar story of how she came in contact with blogging:

> A cousin of mine showed me the blog portal, that was fairly new at the time, and I really hate working with computers, but it was so inspiring to be read and be able to express myself. It was simply worth having to learn the technicalities because the reward was so great.

For the purpose of our discussion here, the above inspires two central points of departure. First, among the respondents, starting blogging was not deliberate. What became clear in many of the interviews was that taking up blogging almost wasn't a conscious decision, but rather something my interviewees seemed to stumble into after being introduced to the practice by someone else. Second, the rationale for continuing blogging is often that of self-expression and a rewarding feeling when being read and receiving comments to a post. Most mention self-fulfillment as a very important part of blogging and it is apparent that it is important to everyone.

Writing about politics

Some however, also express that there are other issues that come into play. Such as the need to voice opinions about the society. This was a somewhat sensitive subject in the interviews, and had to be explored with caution in order not to make a respondent feel uncomfortable. Roozbeh, a 35-year-old engineer, says that he blogs mostly about reflections he makes about life. Sometimes, his thoughts have to do with societal matters, he says, something that he has seen, for example, that made him angry or disappointed. Somewhat reluctantly, he admits that there is a portion of political criticism in what he writes. He summarizes this and says with a smile:

> It feels good to get things off your chest. In a way I guess you could say that I feel free when I blog.

Interestingly enough, during the interviews Roozbeh refused to provide many hints about the nature of the issues he discussed, and disclosed only that he blogged mostly about mundane and everyday things. When reviewing his blog at a later stage, it became apparent that his political involvement was probably bigger than he gave himself credit for (for a lengthier discussion on the content of his blog, see below).

One blogger who describes himself as writing politically from time to time is Farshid, a 28-year-old recently graduated student. He operates both a Persian and an English blog, the latter which he sees as a way of practicing his English. Occasionally he says he "can't suppress" his sentiments and writes, according to himself, about what he really thinks about certain issues – although he tries to keep a low profile:

> I really don't write that strong stuff. Not with any Western standards, at least. But I would probably be deemed being an enemy of the Iranian state. The thing is that I link a lot to other bloggers too – foreign blogs written by expats, among them. So, I associate myself with the "wrong" people who are dangerous in the government's eyes.

Another blogger whom I interviewed, Azadeh, a woman about 30 years of age, is writing a group blog together with some friends. I was invited to have dinner with her and her family, and as our talk evolved, it gets more and more obvious that Azadeh is a very politically opinionated woman, with many clear views on societal matters:

> But I don't dare blogging about these things. At least not in the open. But, sometimes you can write something and mean something else, and your readers understand this.

She says that running a group blog feels safer than having your own, somehow. For this added perception of security she says she's not that afraid of being filtered. But at the same time she points out that she realizes that this is a false security. It is in such moments that it is so easy to cross the invisible line and get yourself into trouble, she says. I asked her if she had ever considered blogging in English, considering that her command of the language was excellent and that she was a very opinionated person:

> I don't know if I could restrain myself from talking about Iran in a way that would make a lot of people very, very angry with me. And I don't dare to risk that, for the sake of my family. […] We'll see – maybe I will one day – who knows? In a way it would be very nice to do it. If you in the west only know how it is to live here! Especially being a woman in this country! Always there's someone else telling us how to live our lives. It's not about the veil, really, it's the simple fact that someone else is in control over what I wear. That's the stuff I would write about [if I had an English blog]. But it's much too dangerous.

Ehsan, a 28-year-old graduate student has a different story that is interesting in this context. He works at an Internet café and is both opinionated and technically adept. But, he has chosen not to blog, as he got into a lot of trouble in the student revolt of 2003 and is scared of what might happen to him if he got involved again.

> I had enough that time [at the student revolt]. I'm afraid, it's as simple as that. My mom was beside herself at that time. She didn't want anything to happen to me, like they did to my uncle who was sent to jail at one time. So, I promised her not to do anything stupid ever again. So, I refrain from blogging – for my mother's sake.

From the relatively few accounts of political blogging that was done by the interviewees, three major synthesis can be drawn. First, some of the interviewees were involved in, what they themselves considered to be, political blogging. But the efforts are not very planned or organized but rather act on impulse and bursts of anger. Second, those who get involved in political blogging have a clear understanding on where the limits for their expression go, and what one can say before it gets too dangerous. Third, for some the dangers of reprisals even bar them from getting involved at all, or to allow their blogging to evolve in a certain direction – even though the political interest is there together with access to the required technology as well as the knowledge needed.

Redefining 'politics': Women's participation

A clear difference between the Iranian public sphere and the Western use of the term is the position and situation for the women within that sphere. In Iran, women participation – in itself – can be seen as a political act as they have never been able to take part in the public sphere before. Noushbar, a 19-year-old photographer, has her own theory why blogs are so popular in Iran:

> In our culture we hide things. We practice self-censorship on parts of our souls. Especially we women – we are forced to hide certain things because someone deemed them inappropriate to discuss in public. Therefore, I'm always afraid that [the government] will stop me from blogging.

Another example is Nisa, a 25-year-old medicine student, who writes some kind of diary, sharing experiences and daily activities as well as thoughts and opinions. She says that the only thing she wouldn't write about is sex. Marital problems would be okay, since she writes under pseudonym, she reasons. Nisa considers her writing to

be non-political in nature, although she adds that just writing about these things so openly can be controversial. She says:

> But somehow that is also the charm of the whole thing: the tingling sensation of doing something forbidden.

She is not the only one of the women interviewees that expresses how the disclosing private matters can stir considerable emotions. When Saba, a 27-year-old computer programmer, started to blog a few years ago she used her real name. She was quickly seduced by the format of blogging and the freedom of writing. However, she says that she was constantly afraid of reappraisals from the government. She was writing a diary of her daily life, and considering she wasn't always doing things that were considered accepted by the government, things started to get dangerous, she says. Every once in a while her blog was attacked by people who thought she was too open with her private life. The attacks were very, very harsh and targeted her personally – and especially as a woman. One instance when these attacks became very intense was when she left the recipe for her favorite cocktail on the blog. Alcohol is forbidden in Iran, and a woman drinking is particularly frowned upon. In this case, she even admitted to like drinking, which only made matters worse. She says:

> There was a terrible fuzz about the whole thing. I got called all kinds of things, and looking back I must say I was probably lucky that my blog didn't get filtered.

Together, these accounts tell the story of how the private and publics sphere conflict with each other. Women are expected to have a less prominent place in society and especially in public sphere. Although Iran is better at integrating women in many places of society (Harrison 2006) than many other Islamic countries, but a lot of places are still off limits (Khosravi 2003:71) – for example the many traditional teahouses, something which easily makes for a habermasian reference. The position of women in the Iranian society is very complex, but in brief, there is a dichotomy between the *Muslim public* and the *female private* that permute the society at large (Khosravi 2003:70). The situation can also be related to Fraser's (1992) critique of Habermas' model, and calls women participation a *subaltern counterpublic* where "members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations, interests and needs", although here the counterpublic is accessible for anyone to read, and that could explain the clash.

Building Networks

Certain traits seem to be unique to the Iranian blogging culture. One such example is the fact that many readers write a short "thank you" after finishing reading a post. This is much less common in the Western blogosphere, where comments are reserved for longer replies on the issues at hand. When asked about it, many of my informants responded that it was the Persian way and that it was considered courteous – "a kind of tip of the hat", as one informant said. Some respondents, of both sexes, also

claimed that this was a much more common sight on a blog written by a woman, and when the commenter often – in these cases – where men. When asked about their theories on the behavior, they explained that it is, in the Iranian society, very few occasions when a man is allowed to approach a strange woman, and that it probably can be attributed to this. This, they emphasized, should not be considered a pick-up attempt, but rather a subtle way of getting in touch with a part of society that is usually hidden from view.

Miryam talks about the comments she receives:

> It is because it is so difficult for boys and girls to meet and talk in real life. That's why so many guys write comments and seek contact that way. The funny thing is that girls don't do the same. Not quite. The guy is supposed to take the active role. I think girls read blogs just as much, but we don't say things that are not necessary. We ask when we have a question, or encourage the author if he or she wrote something good, but not just to get attention.

From a technical point-of-view, there are features that seemed to be missing from the Persian blog hosts at the time, among them the possibility to use Trackback (or Pingbacks).[4] Such feature could help increase the creation of dynamic and informal networks and thus help organize the authors.

BLOGGER OUTPUT

To gain a better understanding of the contexts of some of these blogs, and what was actually said in the posts, I decided to take a closer look at some of the posts written (roughly) during the same time-period as my field study in Iran.

Something fairly common, in the textual output of the interviewed bloggers, is a close relationship to culture. Poetry and literature is something many blog about, and some also publish their own material on their blogs. Consider the example of Noushbar, whose posts are very condensed and abstract, a kind of a conversation, almost resembling a poetic process or even a stream-of-consciousness exercise:

> Do you know, my love, that this is a stream / and you will not return thirsty.

Nisa continues along the same lines and, using metaphors, she paints a vivid picture of something we can only guess:

> Then I saw a colorful butterfly, with two deep-red wings. The butterfly landed on my shoulder and it felt so good; just as if I've met someone dear to me, someone I grew up with. The butterfly said: "I'm sorry", and I replied "No, there's no need to apologize – there are certain things that I need to hear from time to time". Thank you, Mr. Fahtehi, for helping me getting to know my butterflies.

The involvement in directly political issues, in the sense that they are oppositional to governmental policies, is very rare in the studied material. Yet, Roozbeh stands out from the others with a very explicit criticism to the actions of the government: In the

first week of May 2006, the Iranian intellectual and political philosopher Dr. Ramin Jahanbagloo[5] was arrested by security forces in Tehran. Reading Roozbeh's blog from the days immediately after the arrest is makes it very evident that he was indeed extremely critical of the regimes actions and was not afraid to voice his concerns. One of the postings included a long quote from Dr. Jahanbagloo's writings, where he ventures into what he describes as being the limits of the non-violence strategy. Reading this post with the backdrop of the arrest, makes it clear without any doubt that Roozbeh believes that the non-violent strategy of reform is no longer working, and that something needs to be done to come to terms with the situation in Iran. He does not explicitly call for a violent resolution, but clearly he does not think that more of what is practiced now among the elites is a way forward. This can be seen as a direct provocation and almost a call to arms.

Roozbeh writes:

> I know now that I have to do something. I must be active – I can no longer just sit among friends and discuss minimalism and worship the god of postmodernism. […] In the years since the election I've felt many things. At first I was angry at the Iranian people for so easily letting the opportunity for change escape us, but I've come to understand that humans are relative beings. […] I've seen women walking the streets crying, because her old black-and-white television-set just broke; I've seen families who live seven people in a studio apartment. To these people democracy is not so important. If you are hungry, the Khatami's and the Ahmadinejad's are all the same. Whoever gives you something to put on the table is your savior for the day. Now, I must go into the society and talk to people; listen to people and get to know the situation of the poor and misfortunate.

The post with the quote from Jahanbagloo is also commented by a few people, one of which says that he understands the regime's concerns with Jahanbagloo, if this was the kind of writing that he did. Roozbeh replies to the commenter, and they engage in a short discussion. This interaction between reader and writer – so typical of blogs – is a process where, if used thoroughly and thoughtfully, the author can get knowledge back from the people he is writing for. The idea of quoting an arrested dissident in a blog post must be considered a very daring move – particularly keeping in mind that Roozbeh blogs under his own name, without the added security of hiding behind a façade of anonymity.

Farshid enters the world of religions interpretation, *fiqh*, and where it crosses into political territory in one post on his Persian blog. He is critical to the Muslim practice of bigamy, where a Muslim man is allowed to have up to four wives. He says that it is not fair to any of the women, and that it is impossible to "treat them all the same" – a clear criterion set by Mohammad and stated in the Koran. His readers seem to agree, judging by the comments, that this should be banished since the practice cannot be considered modern.

CONTROLLING THE PUBLIC

The counter-reactions from the Iranian government can be discussed in terms of Dahlgren's dimensions (2005:148). The regime's influence primarily affects the first dimension where the imposed bandwidth limitation on broadband access severely hinders development and new services to be introduced and gain momentum (Kalathil & Boas 2003:141, Wilson 2004:391): The Internet, being inherently a symmetric media channel – meaning that in theory, anyone who can receive can also transmit – making the theoretical number of servers connected to the network identical with the number of connected computers. This makes it very cumbersome for a regime to control all the servers and the content hosted on them. Simply put, in order to more efficiently control the content of the network, the Iranian regime needs to limit the number of physical servers. A bandwidth limitation is an extremely efficient way of doing so, because it is next to impossible to host a website on a server with no more than 128 kbps of available bandwidth. People who wish to make content available on the Internet, are thus left with the only option of hosting it centrally somewhere, without the possibility of hiding behind passwords or others means to limit access to a certain number of people or group.

To limit the second dimension of Dahlgren's definition, the representation, the Iranian regime has opted to make all website owners register their webs with a central agency in order to fight anonymous opinions and sites. Note that a failure to register does not automatically result in being blocked – or that registration is not a guarantee *not* to be blocked. What this policy really is about is a *carte blanche* to censor arbitrarily while citing due cause. Also, it is bound to cause a lot more self-censorship since a registered author is fully aware that his actions are traceable, thus creating a virtual panopticon of surveillance.

CONCLUSIONS

The bloggers in this study all got introduced to blogging more or less by chance. They tried it, liked it and continued. This means that there was never a conscious decision to get involved in any kind of public sphere in order to influence other people. However, although most of the respondents claim to write only for their own amusement, several of the respondents started to make posts about things that could be perceived as political – using a wide definition of that word. In analyzing the interviews the women respondents were clear on that their activities differed from those of men, and they gave several examples on strategies they had to have to protect themselves. This way of challenging the idea of the *umma*, the Islamic community and its strong traditions, is definitely a revolt of sorts, but at the same time the women were aware of the ever-present danger of being filtered or worse.

Without doubt, the participation in the public sphere, or at least in an alternative public sphere, has increased. For certain groups of people, most notably women, this

development is even more important. Still, there are severe problems for people writing about certain issues, and the debate cannot be considered to be free in a habermasian way. Such a place would require that a discussion is, in principle, open to anyone and any subject.

The output of the bloggers participating in this study cannot be considered to be very political in a traditional sense. Those who are find themselves limited in their expressions and fail to express themselves beyond using metaphors and metonyms. Organized politics is nowhere to be seen. One reason for this reluctance to be political is due to self-censorship as a result of being afraid to be filtered, and thus losing a great part of their prospective audiences. Therefore, the method of the Iranian government to filter sites that they object to is very successful in controlling the use of the Internet and the expression of the people. It is also something that stops people from taking up blogging in the first place, as one informant showed. The informal networks described by my interviewees are based around courteous greetings rather than organization and strengthening of a group. Technical tools that could support the creation of networks are not on offer by the Iranian blog hosts.

Taken together, all these things tend to confirm the skeptical theories that technological advancement does not automatically lead to increased political participation, pluralism and eventually increased democratization.

There is unfortunately a difference between how we would want the world to work, and what we can find empirical evidence for. Optimism is strengthening in so many ways, but taking certain "truths" for granted might prove to be counter-productive in the long run. In the empirical material presented in this study, one thing is clear: repressive states are repressive also on the Internet. Developments in ICTs cannot be iterated to translate to democratic development: the Iranian government is indeed very good at adopting policies that greatly reduce the technologies usefulness in providing a safe haven for free expression and reach the ideal public sphere.

Still, this study also shows that there is a lot of creativity among Iranian bloggers. This is something that would seem to suggest that people's inherent need to express themselves is a powerful force. The blogging community can have a great role to play in an evolving democracy – but evidence would suggest that it cannot be the prime instigator of such change. It is important, however, to also consider time as a factor and that may allow for some optimism. A systematic strengthening of the civil society – using Putnam's definition where more individual efforts are also considered to be beneficial – can surly, over time, prove to be consolidating beyond what can be seen at this point in time. Thus, while ICT impact on democratizing processes can't be seen right now, there is nothing saying it won't prove to be a valuable tool in the future. That however, would require a governmental policy change to happen.

NOTES

[1] The statistics from *Megawatts Marketing Group* is a composite of figures from *Nielsen/Netratings* and from *International Telecommunications Union (ITU)*.

[2] The figures are split between hosts in this way: *Persian Blog*: 520,000 blogs, *Blogfa*: 55,000 blogs, *Blogsky*: 20,000 blogs, *Mihanblog*: 25,000 blogs, *Parsiblog*: 7,000 blogs and *Perianlog*: 9,500 blogs. (One can only assume that the 63,500 blogs that are unaccounted for in relation to the total of 700,000 are hosted on private servers or on sites outside Iran.)

[3] 128 kbps is, with any Western standard, extremely slow and can in most cases not even be found on the market. The speed can also be written as 0.13 mbps in order to make it easier to compare it with the speeds Westerners are used to. The most common in Sweden for example, is currently 24 mbps – around 200 times faster than the Iranian legal maximum! A vintage modem connection is around 56 kbps, which makes Iranian "broadband" only twice as fast.

[4] This is a feature where the publishing systems connect to exchange information to notify another system when there have been an update. For example, if *Person A* has written a post that *Person B* comments on his blog, a trackback notifies *Person A* that *Person B* have replied and a link pointing to *Person B* is automatically inserted on *Person A*'s blog. This is usually considered to greatly increase the exchange of information and create strong social networks amongst bloggers.

[5] Dr. Jahanbagloo is one of the members of the Iranian intellectual movement, with much of his writing focused on constructive dialogue among divergent cultures. He has contributed significantly to understanding of Western philosophy in Iran and has written numerous books in Persian, English and French, as well as several articles, about Western Philosophy and Modernism. He was an adjunct professor of Political Science department in University of Toronto when he was in Canada. He has been the Head of Department for Contemporary Studies at Cultural Research Bureau.

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