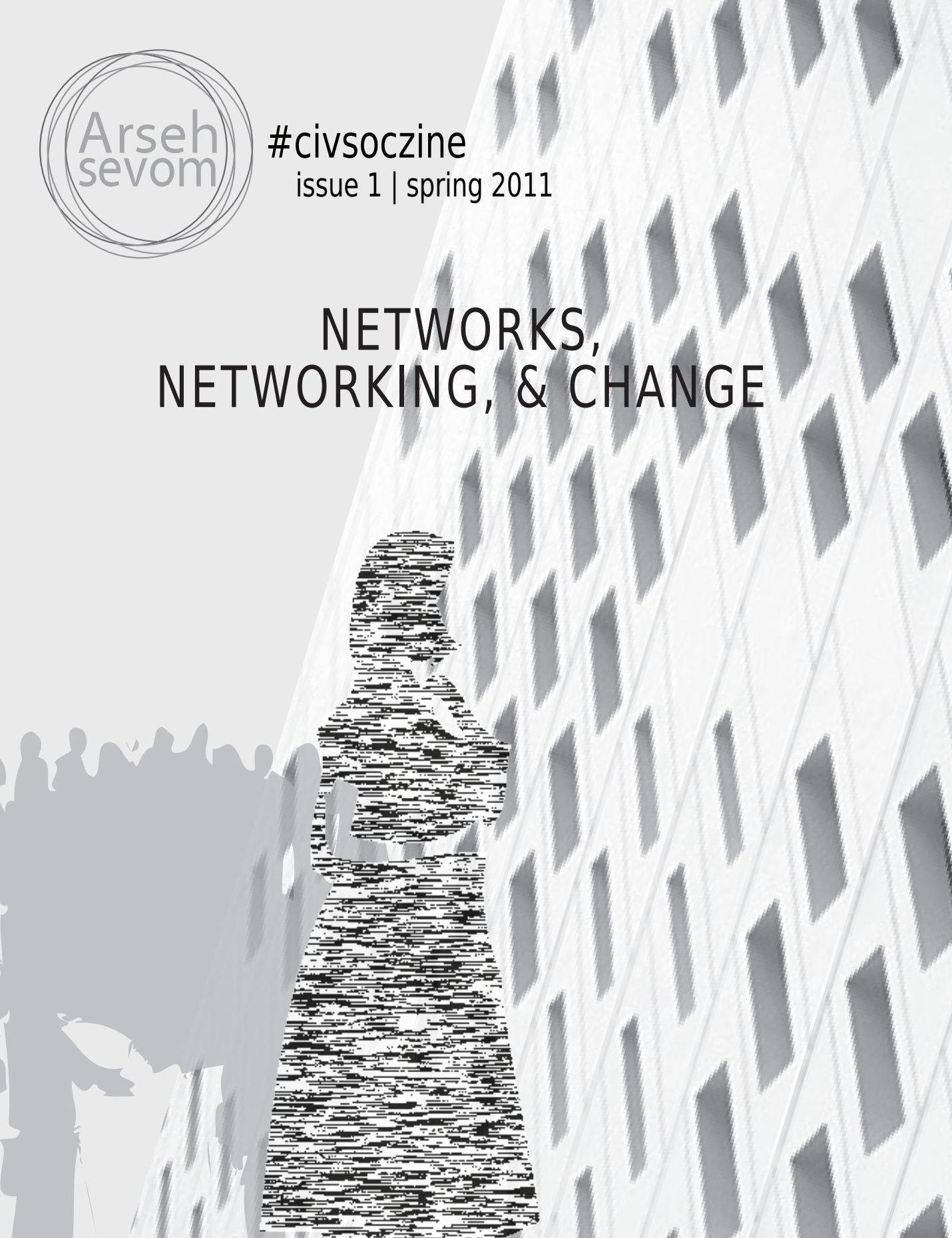# NETWORKS, NETWORKING, & CHANGE

ABOUT
ARSEH SEVOM

"

Human rights organizations and defenders in Iran have found themselves under attack, while abuses of basic human rights have continued. The unrest since the flawed 2009 presidential election has resulted in random and targeted arrests along with a shifting legal landscape that endangers academics and civil society activists in particular. Despite this, we are currently witnessing a transformation of civil society into a growing and creative civil rights movement.

Arseh Sevom (Third Sphere, which refers to the role of civil society) is a non-governmental organization established/registered in 2010 in Amsterdam, aiming to promote peace, democracy, and human rights. The organization's objective is to help build the capacity of organizations and encourage the development of a vigorous third sphere of civil activities. Arseh Sevom is non-partisan and independent and focuses on peace, democracy, and human rights.

Arseh Sevom believes that cooperation among

civil society organizations is key to building a strong and coherent civil rights movement that can thrive and succeed. It aims to become a hub for organizations and individuals working together towards the common goal of free, open, and peaceful communities.

Arseh Sevom promotes the advancement of rights for people of all beliefs, genders, ethnicities, non-violent political affiliations, and more. To make the transition to a more open society, it is important to address the cultural and political roadblocks to the implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Arseh Sevom aims to further the efforts of Iran's civil rights movement by working with its leaders to build capacity and address future needs and developments. The group also plans to develop advocacy tools to address the attitude to human rights among intellectuals, activists, and the general public.

SUBMIT TO THE CIVIL SOCIETY ZINE

The Civil Society Zine is published 4x a year. Each quarter, we focus on a theme. We accept posts that range from 400 words to 4000 words. We are looking for pieces that are provocative, insightful, and filled with ideas. These posts do not need to focus on Iran or the MENA region. In fact, we would love to hear from people with a wide variety of perspectives and experiences.

Our next theme is:

What happens after the giant has been slain?

Say your village has been threatened by a bullying giant for generations. You have finally managed to unify under the common goal of usurping his rule. Now he's gone and so is the unity. How do you manage to continue?

We would love to hear from people with ideas about how to sustain a movement, an organization, a village, a family, a club. We want to know how you move beyond unifying around the defeat of a common enemy to working with diversity, conflict, and compromise.

For this issue, we are not accepting academic-style pieces.

Here are some prompts for pieces:

1) What was the worst conflict you had in your organization and how did you move past it?

2) What happened when the euphoria of victory subsided and the mundane returned? How did you manage to stay active? Why?

3) What can others learn from your experience?

4) Is there anything you would do differently?

To submit or for more information, write to zine@arsehsevom.net.

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#CIVSOCZINE: NETWORKS, NETWORKING, & CHANGE

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ISSUE 1. SPRING 2011

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

by Tori Egherman

This is the first issue of Arseh Sevom's Civil Society Zine. For the first topic, we chose to look at networks and networking: traditional, social, and digital. When we started soliciting contributions in 2010, there was no "Arab Spring." No one knew that protesters in Tunisia and Egypt would be able to unseat long-term leaders and inspire movements all over the Arab world.

As we were working on this issue, I found myself haunted by the story of Emmett Till. Emmet Till was a young African-American teenager, murdered in 1955 because of racial hatred. His was not the first racially motivated murder, but his mother insisted on an open casket funeral so that people could see how brutally he had been attacked. Soon, images of the young boy who had been beaten beyond recognition were on the pages of newspapers all over the world. For many, the horrible beating and his mother's bravery resonated, creating a catalyst for America's civil rights movement. As I read these pieces, I wondered what would have happened if the Internet had existed when Till was murdered? Would the civil rights movement have been more, or less, effective?

Linda Herrera provides a glimpse into this question, when she shows how Facebook was used to spread images of Khaled Said, an Egyptian blogger who exposed police corruption and was beaten to death as a result, and Mohamed Bouazizi,

the Tunisian who burnt himself to death in an act of despair and protest, leading to full-scale demonstrations that ousted long-time, entrenched leaders.

Historian Avery Oslo offers a peek at a movement that uses consensus-building as the determinant for actions in her piece on radical eco-activists in the UK. Trust and shared ownership are more important for them than charismatic leadership or social networking.

In a web-only feature, Halleh Ghorashi and Kees Boersma give us two articles demonstrating how the Iranian diaspora has redefined itself using virtual networks. They demonstrate how a new transnational community was created which is more inclusive, with participants inside and outside Iran.

Babak Rahimi and Elham Gheytanchi examine the roots of digital activism in Iran. The authors show that they are deeper than we sometimes realize.

Ladan Boroumand provides some background on the role of civil society organizations in the campaigning for the 2009 presidential elections in Iran. From Nazila Fathi, we get a reminder of those first, heady days of demonstrations, just after the 2009 election results were announced.

Donya Alinejad challenges both the hype surrounding Facebook and Twitter and the arguments that downplay the role of digital media.

Mana Mostatabi asks hard questions about clicktivism and its effectiveness. Christina Ashtary demonstrates that it is possible to create social capital even online, and Hamid Tehrani challenges activists to think creatively. Finally, Eric Asp muses on building a network by sending congregants out of the church to do service rather than by keeping them in the building.

All of the contributors have provided their work free of charge. Kamran Ashtary volunteered his time to create the illustrations and the design.

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> " In many revolutionary times in history, a strong leader to unite many factions has been integral to the success. This is why it seems counterintuitive that the lack of leader is now the most successful defining feature of resistance networks, but this is how they have operated for decades. Everyone must be a keeper of information, and everyone must be trained in useful revolutionary skills (through skillshares – what one activist learns, they quickly teach to others, who teach it until everyone that feels capable of learning the skill has mastered it).

CREATING THE IMPOSSIBLE: THE INVISIBLE NETWORK OF BRITAIN'S ACTIVIST SUBCULTURE

By Avery Oslo

They are pervasive and loud, many with half-shaven heads, rowdy barking mixed-breed dogs, and mud-encrusted dreadlocks. Yet their network may as well be invisible to the authorities who have spent the better part of thirty years failing to stamp it out. How does this raggle-taggle band of Britain's prevalent environmental activists (also known as eco-warriors or protesters) evade countless attempts of infiltration and eradication?

In this essay I will explain how the invisible network of environmental activists in the UK operates, and how the internet can supplement, though not become a substitute for it. Let me add a disclaimer here before I do that, however: the activist scene in the UK is not without its faults. As with any social movement, it is far from perfect. Sometimes people fall through the cracks, sometimes they get hurt, and sometimes they even die. The activists have chosen to struggle against insurmountable odds because they believe in dying for a world worth living in. Their invisible network is as flawed as any, but it is the best it can be in the United Kingdom at this time. It is possible a similar model of resistance could be successfully implemented in other places where the government no longer serves the people.

While the police have not managed to shut the activist network down, they have made hundreds

of arrests to punish and intimidate breakers of immoral laws. Activists in the UK understand the police's tactics of bullying and imprisonment and find ways to neutralize their impact. Traditionally, legal consequences are designed as a deterrent, but many activists preempt this by seeking out arrest and the publicity it will generate. They believe time in a jail cell is a worthy price for media coverage of corporate greed and government corruption. The more people are made aware, the more people become sympathetic to their cause.

> Consensus decision making eliminates the need for authoritarian behavior from leaders because everyone present has agreed to the outcome, and therefore no one must be coerced into performing something they voted against.

People like PC Mark Kennedy, undercover officer who infiltrated the activist community in Nottingham. For seven years Kennedy built up a case for conspiracy to shut down a power station, and then created a media uproar when he switched allegiances and undermined the very case he had been paid to build against the activists.[1] The story of Mark Kennedy shows that police rarely manage to infiltrate the movement despite repeated attempts because the very intimate nature of the network makes this near impossible. Here's why:

The network is invisible. The protestors operate under shared yet tacit assumptions that are blatantly obvious to anyone who lives with them for more than a month, but virtually impossible for authoritarian forces to comprehend or understand. These are the unspoken rules of protesting, and can range from something as obvious as "don't tag another protestor on a Facebook picture" to something more abstract like "borders are a state construct irrelevant to our own lives, and therefore we do not respect visas, and we protect those who are in violation of theirs." The norms stem from a shared understanding and culture that comes from the intimacy protestors feel with one another due to confined and extraordinary living situations during an action or on a protest site.[2]

No Masters, No Leaders

Every protestor is a replicator of these shared norms. This prevents the need for a leader, which makes it harder to shut down eco-actions. When police come onto a physical site of protest, they always ask who is in charge, and protestors shuffle their feet, or point to their dogs because no one is. Activists work out their alpha male/female issues and put aside differences for the common goal. The lack of leader is crucial to keeping the movement alive. If every protestor is as valuable as another, then oppressors must eliminate every single one in order to quell the movement.

In many revolutionary times in history, a strong leader to unite many factions has been integral to the success. This is why it seems counterintuitive that the lack of leader is now the most successful defining feature of resistance networks, but this is how they have operated for decades. Everyone must be a keeper of information, and everyone must be trained in useful revolutionary skills (through skillshares – what one activist learns, they quickly teach to others, who teach it until everyone that feels capable of learning the skill has mastered it). Protestors recognize that everyone has different abilities and needs and so there will be variation between individuals. Specialization does occur, but even in the most extreme cases of this, every specialist will still display the skills of a renaissance (wo)man. While someone whose skill lies in hacking computer systems may spend most of their time doing that instead of digging tunnels on protest sites, they will still have knowledge of how to dig the safest tunnels, how to build tree defenses, and how to use black bloc tactics in demonstrations to pen the police in, instead of getting penned in by the police. An effective protestor will know enough about everything to teach it to others, yet specialize in a handful of tasks for themselves.

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> Working with someone on an action is the only way to measure someone's trustworthiness and ability to stick it out when situations get grim...If you only trust people you have spent time with, or people who have spent time with someone you trust, then the network is mostly solid and can be relied upon.

A New Democracy: Consensus instead of Tyranny of the Majority

Despite this, there is still room for natural leaders – people born with the talents and characteristics of a good leader- and an effective group of activists nurtures this type of personality. The difference between being led and making effective use of natural leaders is the non-hierarchical nature of the way this works. In decision-making processes, no such leader could demand a vote (also known as tyranny of the majority among protesters), but facilitates in any way possible to develop consensus that all participants can agree on. They know that only when someone agrees to something will they risk things like personal comfort and safety in order to bring it about. Consensus decision making eliminates the need for authoritarian behavior from leaders because everyone present has agreed to the outcome, and therefore no one must be coerced into performing something they voted against. While consensus decision-making takes time and has its drawbacks, activists in the UK feel it is the fairest and most democratic way to operate in the face of an increasingly undemocratic government. The natural leaders in the group take on the responsibility of double-checking to ensure no voices are marginalized in the decision-making process.

The Importance of Trust

The consensus-based democracy's major strong point is that it helps to build trust and therefore facilitate the invisible network. Those who trust one another reduce the need for the oversharing of information. Activists agree that individual actions happen on a need-to-know basis to protect activists from police interrogation or intimidation. In these cases, activists still make use of the network, but no explanation is ever necessary for absurd requests. "Does anyone have three 700 watt generators?" gets answered with "I saw Laura haul some off from the festival last week" rather than "Why? What for?" Activists trust that it is for a good cause, and know that the activist wouldn't have asked if that weren't the case.

Working with someone on an action is the only way to measure someone's trustworthiness and ability to stick it out when situations get grim. The time spent on the ground shows the dedication to the cause and to the others who support it. If you only trust people you have spent time with, or people who have spent time with someone you trust, then the network is mostly solid and can be relied upon. The internet only subsidizes that, but will never replace it, mainly because you do not know who you can trust online. The anonymity offered by the net may be able to work for many things, but not for eco-activism which still largely depends on physically demanding actions that require endurance, ingenuity, and an intimacy different from (yet not inferior or superior to) that which can be obtained from the connections between people online.

But the Internet Has Its Place

The internet can so easily be monitored by governments and corporations who do not have the public's best interests at heart. Even things said on platforms traditionally regarded as private, such as secure email, are not safe from the prying eyes of the highest bidder. In a world where nearly everything is for sale in one way or another, the only safe place is a place where nothing is for sale. On protest sites, corporations cannot reach because no one would or could spend so much time in such close approximation with eco-activists without giving themselves away or becoming sympathetic to the cause. The groups become so close-knit because the intense tedium of day-to-day life while on a protest action means that upwards of 14 hours of conversation per day are the norm. Activists know nearly everything about one another. In this sort of culture then, it becomes easy to spot the person with ulterior motives. The protest site is the one place where governments and corporations cannot infiltrate and where they have no sway, and where the unspoken

bonds of the protest network are created and nurtured. For grassroots activism, such as environmental, which requires hands-on contact this is unlikely to change in favor of the digital network.

That's not to say that the internet has no place in the democratic actions of the people. It is a useful way for activists to arrange meetings, to find out about one another and actions already committed. Most importantly, it is an ideal place to strengthen and perpetuate those cultural activist norms; those invisible strings of network. For example, many environmental activists in Britain make use of social media. They do not discuss illegal activities, but share music and private jokes, slang, and keep in touch with one another regularly to reinforce the unspoken norms of being in the activist subculture. This keeps the bonds of affinity and friendship strong through time and allows the effortless reconvening of affinity groups when opportunity for another action emerges. To the outsider, an environmental activist's page can be virtually indistinguishable from that of a student, punk, or hippie; there is nothing there the government could hold against the activist if ever imprisoned or questioned.

Concluding Remarks

To sum up briefly, the most important factor that keeps activist culture thriving in Britain despite decades of political and corporate oppression is the invisible network of activist norms and shared understandings which is cultivated by:

1. the active rejection of leaders (though not leadership) across the board

2. a democracy based on egalitarian consensus-building instead of majority rule

3. hours of valuable face-time to build trust, friendship, and affinity

4. judicious use of online networking

Obviously this culture has evolved in Britain in reaction to the ways in which oppressors function in this part of the world. Activist culture is similar the world over, yet survives best when the approaches are tailored to each specific time and place for greatest positive impact and the least amount of risk to the activists.

If I had to share one piece of advice for anyone in a situation with need for activism, it would be to study the oppressor and then do things differently yourself. Live life the way you feel it ought to be lived as much as possible, and remember what philosopher Albert Camus wrote in his 1942 novel The Outsider: "The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion."

Notes

Paul Lewis and Rob Evans, "Activists Walk Free as Undercover Officer Prompts Collapse of Case" in The Guardian, 10 January 18, 2011. Available online: http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/jan/10/activists-undercover-officer-mark-kennedy

A protest site is a place of extended action. In the UK, protesters use this tactic in places where their physical presence must be there at all times to guard sites from destruction. For example, if an energy company designates a space with endangered or rare species as the site of their next cancer-causing open-cast coal mine, protesters will move onto the site and take turns living on it in tree-houses, underground tunnels, and self-made bunkers so they will be there to physically resist when the construction of the mine begins.

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Avery Oslo (Creating the Impossible: The Invisible Network of Britain's Activist Subculture) began ethnographic research on Scottish Road Protest Culture in 2004. As a part of this research, she has lived with environmental activists on-and-off for several years on four Scottish protest sites (two of which were forcibly evicted and two of which are still active as of March 2011). During this time, Oslo accompanied the protesters on actions & demonstrations, and traveled with several of them to other sites in the UK to compare notes and observe the construction of the activist network. She would like to thank the protesters who helped her understand the culture enough to write this article, and in particular those who offered constructive feedback and suggestions to the final product. To read more, follow on Twitter (www.twitter.com/AveryOslo) or check out the blog (www.averyoslo.wordpress.com).

LET'S BEEF UP AND MEET UP

by Hamid Tehrani

Sometimes I should credit the authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran with honesty when they continuously insist that they must confront this soft power that is social and political change.
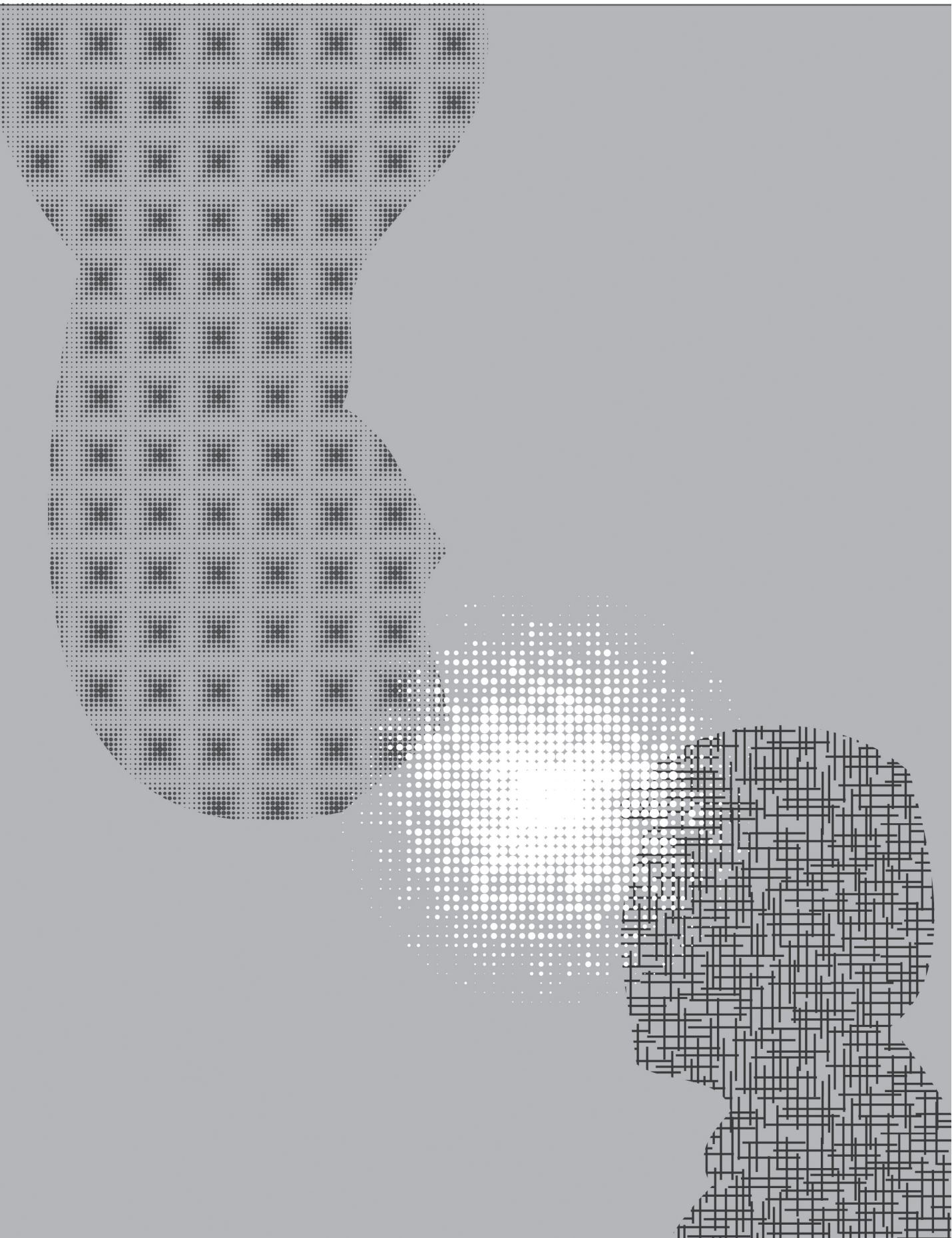
The bitter reality is that while the protest movement used social networking and citizen media in a significant way in 2009 during the hot days of protest, at present, Iranian cyber activists are simply recycling the same virtual environment without any innovation or successful western media innovation.

For the past few years, Iranian cyber activists have used western sites such as facebook, YouTube, Wordpress with enthusiasm and intelligence. They have also created their own platforms such as Balatarin, which is reminiscent of Digg, and Gooya, which predates blogging and was born as political yellow pages, expanding into news gathering and political discussions.

What have we invented or imitated successfully since the 2009 days of protest that has attracted the gaze of the world and the media? Nothing.

A few sites imitated Balatarin but there was no breakthrough.

It is annoying to nag without offering any ideas. So yes. I have two proposals. The first one is to create a knowledge pool where Iranian nerds can engage in discussion, without falling prey to Haystack mania, and try, as business gurus say, to bring synergy to our collective talents and plans.

The second idea is more concrete. I was inspired by the French journal, Liberation's matchmaking site. This site brings together people who share the same cultural tastes, such as a love for a writer or movie director.

The same story can be seen in Meetup.com. Meetup.com has become a portal for moving virtual connections into the physical world. Tens of thousands of groups from knitters to dog walkers to philosophers have been able to form using Meetup.com and then meet in cafes and parks all over the US.

How can we do it? Ali, Nasrin, and Ahmad would love to work on developing an art expo on the internet. They can come to an Iranian Meet up and share their ideas, exchange experiences, and launch projects. It can work for art as well as for politics. For the Iranian version, we would be better off staying in the virtual world, rather than the physical one because of the security concerns.

In Meetup, we can beef up.

Hamid Tehrani is a long-time observer of the Iranian blogosphere. He is a researcher, blogger, and journalist who is the Persian editor of Global Voices Online. Tehrani has published a number of articles about Iran in journals and magazines all over the world and has been interviewed by the BBC and other international media. Recently Tehrani led seminars at Yale on anti-Semitism in Iranian blogs.

> What have we invented or imitated successfully since the 2009 days of protest that has attracted the gaze of the world and the media? Nothing.

IRAN IN FERMENT: CIVIL SOCIETY'S CHOICE

By Ladan Boroumand

It is worth exploring, even anecdotally, the extent to which civil society organizations in Iran have been instrumental to the unprecedented popular participation that marked both the June 12 election and the extraordinary wave of protest that followed when the authorities hastily and unconvincingly named incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the overwhelming winner. The role played in these events by the Iranian civil-rights movement – a name that I will use here as shorthand for women's-rights and student activists as well as human-rights advocates – is one that we will never adequately grasp unless we keep the legal and historical backdrop in mind.

When it was assigned to draft a constitution for the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran thirty years ago, the Assembly of Experts made sure that the sovereignty of the people would not be the government's source of legitimacy. According to the Assembly's intention, the supreme leader's absolute power over the whole government emanates not from the people, but rather from the divine authority of the Twelfth (or Hidden) Imam, which is delegated to the supreme leader during the Imam's miraculous occlusion. Elections, therefore, are mere administrative procedures whose legitimacy depends upon the preelection vetting of the candidates and the postelection approval of the results by the unelected, cleric-dominated Council of Guardians.

In such a setting, elected officials up to and including the president have little power to make democratic reforms. Realizing this, civil-rights activists began some time ago to debate among themselves what position to take regarding the 2009 vote. In 2005, they had decided to boycott the elections as unfree, and to focus instead on organizing robust civil society organizations that might be able to negotiate with the government as independent entities.

Pushing Back Against Oppression

Semi-official student groups asserted their independence, with the stated goal of defending human rights and students' interests only. Women's-rights activists who had been protesting gender discrimination by holding regular (and regularly repressed) demonstrations decided to launch the Million Signatures Campaign behind a public petition to end unfair laws affecting women. Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi and other lawyers set up the Defenders of Human Rights Center (DHRC), while other lower-profile but dynamic human-rights groups proliferated during Ahmadinejad's first term and put out a steady stream of reporting on the Islamic Republic's abuses. An alarmed Ahmadinejad administration stepped up repression, hitting not only activists but also ordinary citizens, as the masked goons of the so-called Social Safety Project spread terror and intimidation throughout Iran.

To Vote or Not to Vote?

By 2009, the public was primed to vote Ahmadinejad out, but the activists were feeling vulnerable and isolated after years of savage persecution. They could either ignore these unfree elections as they had four years earlier, or they could plunge in and try to help elect a lesser evil. They knew that the regime might exploit the latter course in order to bolster its bogus claim to be overseeing a genuine electoral process, but they also knew that for international reasons the regime badly needed a big turnout and hence would permit a few weeks of free expression (as it did).

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Whatever their stand on voting, many activists were determined to make the most of this brief opening to energize the public and challenge the candidates. In the end, the women, the human-rights advocates, and the students opted for different but compatible approaches.

Most human-rights organizations refused to campaign for or against any candidate. Shirin Ebadi and others set up the Committee to Defend Free and Fair Elections. The state tried to hamper it, even arresting one member. Unbowed, the committee stated publicly on May 18 that the upcoming elections were not meeting minimal standards of freedom and fairness.

The human-rights advocates worked on causes such as raising awareness about the plight of the Baha'i religious minority, especially the way its young people are persecuted in schools and barred from higher education. With the heat thus turned up, the campaign of Mehdi Karrubi publicly acknowledged the rights of Baha'is as Iranian citizens. To induce such a senior regime figure to address such a taboo issue was a coup. On election eve, a group known as Human Rights Activists in Iran published a list of demands calling upon the candidates to seek abolition of the death penalty and respect the human rights of students, women, children, detainees, religious and ethnic minorities, and civil-rights advocates. By this time, rights activists had become a common sight at campaign rallies, holding signs calling for an end to violence against women and capital punishment. They were greeted with nervousness by campaign officials, but the public was ready to hear their appeals and accept their leaflets.

Activists for women's rights met the challenge of the elections by organizing an Iranian Women's Movement Coalition that brought together forty groups and more than seven-hundred advocates. The coalition explicitly demurred from taking a position for any candidate or even on whether people should vote or not. Instead, it focused solely on seeking the reform of Articles 19 through 21 and Article 115 of the 1979 Constitution (which allow for shari'a-based gender discrimination) and securing Iran's adherence to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). During the campaign, women organized numerous seminars and debates with representatives of both Karrubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi, the other reformist candidate. The women also openly gave out brochures, sought petition signatures, and recruited new members – all activities that just a few months before would have meant jail, a flogging, or both. While neither Karrubi nor Mousavi could promise constitutional reform, both vowed to pursue Iran's adherence (with religious reservations attached) to CEDAW. Both also pledged to nominate women to important decision-making posts with the long-term goal of constitutional change. On June 6, the coalition declared success at "raising public awareness about gender issues" and announced that it was dissolving.

The Students and the Candidates

The student groups played a different but no less important role. They rejected the idea of a boycott for the simple reason that the regime would not allow them to campaign for one. On May 1, the

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biggest students' union, the Office for Consolidating Unity, issued a long list of demands covering items specific to students and universities as well as matters of a more general import. The list ticked off all the obstacles to freedom of thought, expression, and association that becloud university life, and proposed concrete measures to restore these liberties. The demands also included calls for (among other things) academic freedom, an end to gender discrimination on campus, an end to admissions based on political and religious opinions, and an end to rules that allow administrators to suspend student dissidents. On a more general level, the students clearly articulated all the demands that the various forces of civil society had been formulating for most of the previous decade. They called for full religious and minority rights, democratization of the electoral system, judicial reform, gender equality, labor rights, human rights, civil rights, and more. They also urged the candidates to guarantee that they would safeguard the private sphere on behalf of citizens who want to be left alone.

> "We refused to accept that the regime is not animated by the same logic which presides over our understanding."

The students sent their list to both reformist candidates and asked them to offer a response to each demand. On May 14 and 15, the students held a seminar on "Civil Society, Agenda-Based Action, and Accountable Government." Representatives of both Karrubi and Mousavi showed up to discuss the issues that the students had raised, while attendees from civil society were also allowed to speak. It is worth noting that all the speakers urged participation in the elections – which perhaps explains why the security forces allowed such a subversive gathering to be held.

After negotiations with the two candidates, the students' unions decided to join Karrubi's campaign. They claimed that he had answered their demands most concretely and had promised to push them with the state leadership. Without denying their prodemocratic identity, the students took a pragmatic step toward achieving some of their more feasible goals. During the three weeks that they spent on the hustings for Karrubi, the students used his campaign as a vehicle for the promotion of human rights, women's rights, and civil rights in the streets and squares.

Candidate Response to Civil Rights Demands

If it is hard to measure with certainty the contribution that the civil-rights movement made to the unprecedented level of interest and turnout that the 2009 presidential election featured, it is easy to show how the movement put its mark on the content of the campaign and the rhetoric of the candidates. For the first time in the history of voting in the Islamic Republic, candidates had found themselves forced to rewrite their platforms in response to concrete demands framed by unabashed democrats. Not only did the two reformist candidates pledge to grant as many rights as they could (which is not many, really) consistent with the Constitution, but each openly declared himself to be personally opposed to the laws establishing polygamy and the mandatory veiling of women. Both also vowed to stop militia harassment of citizens in public places, and to abolish the Social Safety Project.

By making the air ring with their demands, the rights activists gave Mousavi and Karrubi strongly democratic-sounding rhetorical ammunition to fire at Ahmadinejad during their televised debates in early June. Oddly enough, instead of defending his policies in the name of the regime and its principles, Ahmadinejad reminded both his rivals that he had done nothing that they had not done during their own tenures in high office during the 1980s. Although every candidate vowed loyalty to the late Ayatollah Khomeini, by attacking one another on the axis of demands framed by civil-rights advocates, the candidates were offering the public the stunning spectacle of regime stalwarts chipping away at the regime's own legitimacy. This unprecedented campaign moved citizens to go to the polls en masse with the thought that, at last, something really was different and their votes would finally count. The high-profile presence of so many rights activists at campaign events, banners aloft and stacks of flyers in hand, had powerfully fed this sense that a genuine campaign was afoot, with vital matters concerning the country's future poised for decision.

The instant and bloody repression aimed at

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> Candidates had found themselves forced to rewrite their platforms in response to concrete demands framed by unabashed democrats.

students during the postelection unrest, like the arrest and torture of leading rights activists and student dissidents, is the regime's testament to their crucial influence.

The civil-rights activists did not directly cause or lead the gigantic public protests that erupted when the authorities pricked the voters' balloon with claims that Ahmadinejad had won 63 percent, but it might well be true that the demonstrations were an indirect consequence of the moral and ideological leadership that those activists had exerted with such élan during the campaign. The instant and bloody repression aimed at students during the postelection unrest, like the arrest and torture of leading rights activists and student dissidents, is the regime's testament to their crucial influence.

"We Made a Mistake…"

"As far as these elections go, the moral of the story is that we should not have been so eager, should not have ignored the minimal standards for free and fair elections, and should not have taken part in an unfair vote," ruefully concluded the journalist and leader of an alumni organization Zeid Abadi a few hours before his arrest on June 16. The students had assumed that there was some degree of popular sovereignty dormant in the 1979 Constitution, a sovereignty that they had thought the electorate might rouse into wakefulness by voting en masse. "We made a mistake," wrote a bitter Zeid Abadi. "We refused to accept that the regime is not animated by the same logic which presides over our understanding."

Zeid Abadi, whose bruised face appeared on television during the first session of the Tehran show trial in late August 2009, may for now persist in that sad conclusion as he sits in the darkness of a prison cell. Yet as one thinks back over the breathtaking events that rocked Iran during the middle of this year, one cannot but recognize that there are mistakes which change the course of history. No doubt the decision of the Iranian civil-rights movement to involve itself in the 2009 elections will count as such a mistake. For if it is true that they failed to help the lesser evil win – and some of them are now paying dearly for this failure – it is no less true that they were instrumental in thwarting the Islamic Republic's plot to usurp popular legitimacy.

Note

Ladan Boroumand is research director and cofounder of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation (www.iranrights.org), which promotes human rights and democracy in Iran, and a former visiting fellow at the International Forum for Democratic Studies. She is the author of la Guerre des Principes (1999), an extensive study of the tensions throughout the French Revolution between human rights and the sovereignty of the nation. She is the author and co-author of several articles on the French Revolution, the Islamic revolution of Iran, and the nature of Islamist terrorism.

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FROM A BEEP TO A WHISPER

By Nazila Fathi

It was on a Tuesday, 12 days after the election that the opposition planned a protest in Vali-Asr Square in central Tehran and posted a call on opposition Websites and Facebook to mobilize supporters. Only few hours earlier before the protest was to begin, government forces announced that they would gather in the same Square to stage a pro-government rally. It was evident that they were plotting a confrontation to disrupt the protest.

The country had been engulfed in chaos since June 12, 2009, when many believed that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had rigged the votes. Hundreds of thousands poured on the streets to stage demonstrations and clashed with government forces. Over a dozen were killed and thousands were arrested.

Yet people were coming out in massive numbers hoping to force the government to nullify the results and hold new elections. In an effort to disrupt their ability to communicate, the government shut down the text messaging service from the Election Day and the mobile phones in many areas. Internet was slowed down to a crawl and satellite television channels were jammed.

Spreading the Word Via Internet and Satellite TV

Internet and satellite television played a major role in mobilizing people in the months leading to the election when a major force emerged with a mission to prevent Mr. Ahmadinejad from re-election. The new opposition force was using all its tools to spread information about the economic malaise, foreign policy turmoil, and social and cultural crackdown that had escalated during Mr. Ahmadinejad's term.

It was on the Internet, on Weblogs and news Websites, that activists first posted news and their analysis. They could no longer rely on the published press because of government crackdown. Instead, Satellite television, including opposition channels beamed from Los Angles or the Persian service BBC and Voice Of American, picked up and broadcast them. Although, authorities have long outlawed satellite television, people defy the ban and the channels have deep reach around the country.

The news that stirred anti-regime sentiment ranged from reports about the arrest and torture of journalists and activists to the beatings of women on the streets for not being properly dressed and Mr. Ahmadinejad's desperate efforts to attract support. He distributed free potatoes in small towns and villages to garner votes.

Whispered News

On that Tuesday, I went to Vali-Asr Square wondering how the opposition would pull off this time despite the bloody confrontations; the size of the opposition had not dwindled in the past ten days.

The Square was filled with thousands of government supporters bused in from faraway places. Carrying their banners, they had a good half-a-mile walk so that the buses that brought them would not block the area. There was no visible sign of the opposition; a few young people sat listlessly in front of shops or on the curbs.

Then I heard a whisper: "demonstration moved to Vanak," said a young woman carrying a bag of dippers to mislead the pro-government forces. Vanak Square is 10 miles north of Valiasr Square. Few minutes later a second man approached me to whisper, "go to Vanak." And then the whispers continued.

I lingered around to talk to the buoyant demonstrators chanting in support of Mr. Ahmadinejad. I was interviewing a Basij commander, the pro-government paramilitary force, when one of his

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men rushed to say, "we are hearing that there is a huge crowd in Vanak Square. They hurriedly began moving to that direction on their motorcycles.

I hopped in a taxi too. The traffic was so bad that I had to get off and walk for 20 minutes. Hundreds of thousands had gathered and blocked the square, the nearby streets and the Valiasr Street for miles, stretching north of the square.

Protestors had ditched technology and turned to word of mouth to mobilize.

Nazila Fathi (From a Beep to a Whisper) covered Iran for 15 years for The New York Times and was recently a Niemen fellow at Harvard. During the 2009 post-election protests, her house was under surveillance. Realizing the danger to herself and her family, she and her family left the country

shortly after the elections.

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THE DEATH OF THE "TWITTER REVOLUTION" AND THE STRUGGLE OVER INTERNET NARRATIVES

by Donya Alinejad

In her latest speech on internet freedom, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared the internet the "town square" of the 21st century. Clinton seized on the widespread attention for Facebook during the Egyptian revolution and used the opportunity to reiterate internet-oriented US foreign policy. Just days earlier the Egyptian people had ousted Hosni Mubarak, their dictator of 30 years. Cairo's Tahrir Square had been occupied by protesters, stained with the blood of the revolution's martyrs, and gained iconic status as the center of the 21st century's most populous revolutionary movement. Soon after, protesters in Libya named the Northern Court in Benghazi "Tahrir Square Two." If these events show us anything, it is that the town square of the 21st century is still, simply, the town square.

Internet Hyperbolae

It is not the first time Clinton's language has hyperbolized the role of the internet, thus making her appear severed from reality. Author and scholar, Eyvgeny Morozov, skillfully rebutted her first major speech on internet freedom given in January 2010 on these very grounds, expressing unease at the Cold War imagery she evoked in warnings that "a new information curtain is descending." Clinton's latest speech reminds us that the power struggle over new technologies is not limited to the battles over who uses and controls the internet and how. It includes the battles over who gets to define and frame the internet through dominant narratives, and who challenges them.

Perhaps the most widespread and heated contestation of an internet narrative is that of the "Twitter Revolution." Although it was first used with reference to Moldova, this term enjoyed its peak during the tumultuous aftermath of the Iranian presidential elections of June 2009. With his piece, The Revolution will be Tweeted, Andrew

Sullivan was quickly established as a leading proponent of the hype. He eagerly compared the power of the Iranian protesters to the electoral success of President Barack Obama the year prior. The only link seemed to be some broad associations with democratic change and popular associations with social media applications such as Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube, but it certainly caught on.

Down with the "Twitter Revolution"!

Unfortunately, Sullivan not only jumped the gun on Iran, his perspective also obscured the ways the Obama campaign had effectively hijacked users' online social networks, rather than building them, as documented in Eric Boehlert's *Bloggers on the Bus*. Even though Iran's case was still developing at the time, tech journalists, bloggers, activists, and independent/public news media immediately poked the "Twitter Revolution" narrative full of holes. These skeptics challenged the notion that technologies rather than people are decisive for social movements, and continue to argue for placing new media impacts within wider, offline (socio-economic and political) contexts, stressing that the new technologies are "tools" that are used for oppression as well as liberation.

Although Iran's case carried the Twitter Revolution narrative to new heights, it also played a part in mainstreaming its counter-narratives. Sullivan himself was soon among those "cured" of the "Twitter obsession," as Morozov put it. And notwithstanding the unfortunate irony about the "town square" metaphor, Clinton's latest speech[1] reflected elements of this more balanced counter-narrative when she said of Egypt and Tunisia:

> People protested because of deep frustrations with the political and economic conditions of their lives. They stood and marched and chanted and the authorities tracked and blocked and arrested them. The internet did not do any of those things; people did. In both of these countries, the ways that citizens and the authorities used the internet reflected the power of connection technologies on the one hand as an accelerant of political, social, and economic change, and on the other hand as

> a means to stifle or extinguish that change… We realize that in order to be meaningful, online freedoms must carry over into real-world activism.

Gone is the empowerment of technologies over people. Despite the contested "Twitter revolution" narrative's partial revival through these recent revolutions, we all seem to be sobering up more and more from the new media celebrations. It looks like the counter-narrative has permeated the mainstream, balanced the scales, and even pronounced the debate around the "Twitter Revolution" dead.[2]

What Next?

Perhaps looking back on the rise of this particular narrative can shed some light on the path forward, including how to approach its more subtle but persistent variants such as "the Wikileaks Revolution" (Tunisia) and "Revolution 2.0" (Egypt).[3] In Iran's case, techno-utopianism in international coverage boomed due to foreign journalists being banned, credited Iranian journalists being restricted, and a young, mobile, tech-savvy, and highly educated population being at the ready. Certainly, the Western audience's recognition of social media networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as popular, Western, youth-oriented, and benign also played a part. But the "Twitter revolution"[4] also caught on due to a number of narratives that, in the Western consciousness, pre-existed the uprising.

One of them was the idea, cultivated since the early 2000s, of Iranian dissident blogger-journalists being driven to the free spaces of the internet in regionally disproportionate numbers, and experiencing persecution for their online, anti-regime endeavors. The stories of persecuted bloggers like Sina Motallebi and Hossein Derakhshan (still in jail today) come to mind, as does that of Omid Reza Mir Sayafi, the first Iranian blogger to die in prison. In the same period, the Bush administration pushed the Iran Freedom Support Act, which was passed in September, 2006. The serendipitous overlap between the rise of the internet's role in Iranian civil society and the US regime-change agenda seemed to strengthen both. An additional narrative, purportedly reproduced historically by Iranian diaspora in

the West, was one of Iranians (or "Persians", rather) as intellectually and culturally advanced, similar to Westerners, "civilized," and proud.

But there was also a deeper story about the internet itself as a vehicle of genuine democratic change that may have tipped the scales from balanced online/offline international solidarity towards over-enthusiasm about internet technologies. Fred Turner's *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* traces internet narratives from the technology's beginnings, and shows that the intersection between the internet and visions of utopian societies is as old as the Net itself. Could this utopian genesis narrative be at the root of today's internet-boosting?

"Tools of Liberation"

Turner argues that early perceptions about computers and the internet were shaped less by the engineers and programmers who made them and more by an elite of journalists and hippy ideologues from 1960s and 70s San Francisco who had the access and influence to write about these new technologies. This narrative was intended "to create the cultural conditions under which microcomputers and computer networks could be imagined as tools of liberation." Given Turner's account, it is not hard to see how today's internet conjures up images of a quest for freedom.

This could be the reason why, in the summer of 2009, San Franciscan computer programmer, Austin Heap, was moved to involve himself in the Iranian Green movement without any prior knowledge or interest in Iran. He designed Haystack, a program which encrypts all online activity and hides this encrypted data in what looks like normal traffic. Heap's inspiration was seeing images from the protests – his only connection to what he saw, the internet. The Tor Project was a program similarly used in solidarity with Iranians. Tor is headed by Andrew Lewman and designed to allow people in Iran to use anonymous proxies to hide their identities and online activity. The attention for such stories boomed and overshadowed the Iranian government's censorship, government supporters' hacking of opposition websites, and the government's use of online amateur footage to identify protesters.

In addition, the hacktivist groups Anonymous and Pirate Bay supported the protesting Iranians by starting the website, Anonymous Iran, providing tools to circumvent censorship by way of navigating with privacy, uploading files through the Iranian firewall, and launching attacks on pro-government websites. The international involvement and dedication of these cyber-activists further entwined utopian internet narratives with the message of the Iranian pro-democratic movement, especially as they coalesced with the Green protesters' counterparts outside the country.

Between Solidarity and "Statecraft"

But these acts of solidarity also smuggle in elements of US foreign policy and commerce, together with a touch of American nationalism. Through international solidarity actions, the lines between the interests of citizens, business, and the state have become dangerously blurred, for instance, with the US administration's "21st Century Statecraft", spearheaded by none other than Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton (yes, she likes reminding us which century it is). The US government connections to solidarity actions with Iran first came under public scrutiny in the much-covered delay in Twitter maintenance when the Iran protests were breaking out in June 2009.

The US State Department asked the private company to instate a maintenance delay so that Iranians could continue to use Twitter at Iran's peak traffic hours (the company denied that the State Department had a hand in their decision to delay maintenance). State connections are also rife around Tor, as the project was an existing one, funded by the US Department of Defense (but also other organizations like the Electronic Frontier Foundation). More state links emerged on April 13th 2010, when the US Treasury Department gave Heap an exemption from US sanctions to distribute Haystack legally in Iran.

This was part of a wider policy approach that saw a ban lifted on US companies like Google and Microsoft to export their products to Iran in March

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of the same year under the assumption that this would facilitate the development of Iranian civil society. But this would have little if any effect for Iranian citizens who would likely already be accessing these programs illegally. In Heap's case, the Haystack project fizzled out quietly as it was later found to be fraught with security holes, thus endangering the very people it was meant to protect.

But while rushing to criticize this US narrative of "democratizing internet diplomacy," and embracing post-Twitter revolution perspectives, some have ended up highlighting the spirit of American free market entrepreneurship that drives the technology industry that gave birth to the internet as we now know it. When American business competes with government to implicitly take credit for people's revolutions we are still a far cry from being moved by the power of universal values of humanity. This blatant self-congratulation reminds us that the Twitter revolution narrative is more about a clamoring to claim glory for our own principles, policies, and tools. As one critic declared, "To proclaim a Twitter revolution is almost a form of intellectual colonialism, stealthy and mildly delusional: We project our world, our values, and concerns onto theirs and we shouldn't."

> The international involvement and dedication of cyber-activists further entwined utopian internet narratives with the message of the Iranian pro-democratic movement...

Intervention Hypocrisy

At any rate, the cracks in America's hypocritical internet policies are now receiving increasing attention in ongoing public discussions around US internet policy, and the narrative is shifting in a new direction. Two major issues are dominating: Wikileaks and Net Neutrality[6]. The Net Neutrality debate currently raging in the US involves defending internet access for users, not against despotic leaders but against big business interests.

The Obama administration came to power having promised to instate federal Net Neutrality laws to protect users from broadband operators blocking or prioritizing certain internet content, or charging content providers fees for favorable placement. Despite these claims, in December 2010, President Obama has allowed broadband companies like Google and Verizon to effectively write the FCC regulatory policy meant to protect internet users. Some critics have even made comparisons between the total suppression of the internet during the Egyptian uprising and the damages done by weak Net Neutrality laws.

And questions around US hypocrisy as revealed by its response to Wikileaks have certainly gained much attention internationally. Secretary Clinton made sure to address it in her latest policy speech, bringing up and defending the administration's condemnation of the Wikileaks organization, which used the internet to widely distribute tens of thousands of leaked documents, including secret diplomatic cables. Since then, what is seen by some as an international manhunt launched by the US government for dissident Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, has raised questions about the US discourse of democracy and freedom of speech in its policy regarding the internet. And this does not even touch on the quieter issue of America's surveillance of its own citizens though Facebook.[5]

Controlling information dissemination according to political interest and using media as a means of foreign intervention, are not new – certainly not to the US. The issue raises comparisons to the US Federal government's Cold War use of the external Voice of America radio and TV broadcasts in an anti-Soviet "campaign of truth." The role of VOA (an organization that also provided funding for the Tor Project) remains problematic today, including in the case of Iran where it is available via satellite and internet despite being banned by the Islamic Republic, and receives criticism on various fronts both inside and outside Iran.

The narrative of hypocritical interventions challenges the US narrative of internet diplomacy, and must be seen within the context of wider US

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foreign policy. As Morozov put it, "You cannot say, 'We want to promote internet freedom,' when every single other branch of the US government wants to promote the opposite." So, what is new about (the US) using the internet along these same, old lines?

Is the Internet Any Different?

It is hard to say whether America's present internet intervention policies are a deterrent from, or an aperture to, sanctions and/or military action against Iran. Some American progressives denounced the Iran Freedom Act as "laying the groundwork for war." But since 2009, some blogger activists in Iran, as well as Iranian American analyst Abbas Milani at Stanford University, have called for stronger US action in further facilitating internet access in Iran. It remains to be seen whether US investment and/policy in this vein has any direct influence for civil society inside Iran. However, what is clear are the difficulties that international money has brought upon Iranian NGOs in the past, having had the assistance deemed as "foreign intervention" by the Islamic Republic.

> People protested because of deep frustrations with the political and economic conditions of their lives.

But, surely, precisely any elements that make controlling the internet difficult for authoritarian regimes also make it difficult to use as a targeted tool of intervention. Its many-to-many (versus broadcast's one-to-many) capability for distributing content is one such quality, making the internet's relatively speedy, low-cost, and large-scale interactive potentials too unruly for a single top-down truth campaign. This also makes it impossible for all international online involvement in Iran's social movements or civil society to be reduced to simply instances of foreign interference.

As in Tunisia and Egypt, a multiplicity of international support was shown to Iranian protesters through, and because of, internet communications. Whether through the proxy servers offered, the

DDoS attacks carried out on regime websites, or simply the widespread and timely sharing of protest footage on Facebook and Twitter outside the country. Whether through individuals or organizations, government or non-government funded sources, the variety of direct support reflected a difference from what broadcast media were capable of offering in many ways.

Just one of these was the circulation of protest footage that was combined with a soundtrack and, sometimes, photographic stills. As the original protest footage circulated online it quickly became adapted, built-upon, and developed into what can be called a genre of its own: the first interactive, multimedia montages of revolution to be circulated to a wide audience while the event itself is still unfolding. These mash-up products not only mobilize networks of emotional empathy, but the process of their production itself allows a network of people to add value through their creative alterations. This value is added even in the simple act of adding a personal subscript to the shared footage by taking up the invitation to "say something about this link."

What's in a Medium?

Media scholar, Marshal McLuhan's seminal claim is that the medium always embeds itself within the message it conveys. Indeed, McLuhan's idea(l) of the "global village" directly inspired the San Franciscan, hippy internet boosters and has since become firmly entrenched in many common views of the internet today. Utopian societies aside, if we want to understand how narratives about internet technologies and applications play a part in struggles over the internet, we are well-served to take seriously the question of how the medium influences the message.

This question tends to be left unaddressed by the staunchest internet skeptics. Seemingly satisfied with beating the (mostly-) dead horse of the Twitter Revolution, they emphasize that new media do not have all that much new to offer. Bestselling author, Malcolm Gladwell's much-cited piece, *Small*

Change: Why the Revolution will not be Tweeted[8], placed him squarely in the counter-hype camp. To him, the medium of communication is rather irrelevant to the message communicated, but he prefers good-old-fashioned face-to-face, shoulder-to-shoulder activism. He reapplies this view in his recent comment on the Egyptian revolution, stating that the "strong ties" (as opposed to "weak ties") necessary for the centralization and leadership that lead to effective activism and meaningful social change are not built via the internet.

Let us leave aside the poignant critique that points out Gladwell's romanticization of activism and oversight of key combinations of weak and strong ties necessary for social change. Instead, returning to Turner's study, let us recall a shift that took place with emergence of the internet from the 1950s Cold War notion of computers as machines of heartless State bureaucracy and interests, to the 60s' countercultural movements. Inspired and fascinated by the structure of this new technology, ideologues like Howard Rheingold, helped reinvision computer users as a networked "virtual community," intentionally framed in contrast to the centralization of the state. It also served the purpose of disconnecting the narrative of this new media from the US military project it stafrted out as.

It seems Gladwell's rejection of the internet's power rests on his implicit acceptance of that original narrative: that the decentralized and non-hierarchical structure of technology itself leads to a decentralized and non-hierarchical structure of the social movements it is used in. But it is not entirely clear why this would necessarily be the case.

Winning the Struggle over Internet Narratives

We see the power of narratives in the ways we think about, talk about, and envision the role of the internet in our everyday lives and societies – present and future. We also see the importance of challenging dominant narratives about the internet

> Elements that make controlling the internet difficult for authoritarian regimes also make it difficult to use as a targeted tool of intervention.

when they are hyperbolic, misrepresentative of actual cases of internet use, and disempowering to people. We have seen activists and tech reporters challenge and bury the Twitter Revolution (and its ghosts in the case of Tunisia and Egypt).

In parallel, journalists have strongly challenged the notion that the internet makes professional journalism obsolete, and organizers have challenged the notion that using the internet removes any possibility for leadership in mobilization. Wikileaks' Assange has repeatedly said that simply making information available in the form of raw data online is not enough, teaching us that certain designated centers must make information relatable, urgent, and politicized.

And columnist Roger Cohen[9], who extensively covered the Green Movement, has stated repeatedly that in an information-rich world, fast-paced and emotionally moving scenes or accounts circulate widely, which makes the role of credited journalists all the more important as storytellers, "contextualizers," analysts, and verifiers. And the Egyptian revolution has shown us that collectives such as youth and student groups, organized labor, leftist organizations, etc. are key in leading revolutionary process all the way. Their effective use of online applications in mobilization has brought forth a form of leadership with multiple, dynamic nodes rather than an absence of them.

And in both Iranian and Egyptian cases we see that social media as information disseminators are first on the scene, ahead of the news, and post unique content, but still require the eventual boost of established broadcast media (CNN, Al Jazeera, etc.) to make the story pass the threshold into the global. As some announce our entry into a stage of cyber-pragmatism[10] rather than hyperbolism, we see the significance of highlighting critical counter-narratives wherever signs of techno-utopianisms, hypocrisies of the powerful, and national and market chauvinisms reemerge.

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Looking at Iran

While the prevalence of internet usage in Iran was cited as a reason for the popular uprising in 2009, the current revolutionary wave engulfing Arab nations flies in the face of that story. The question is – as the lingering techno-utopian, Clay Shirky[11] himself admits – if the internet is so indispensable for social movements, should Iran's technological and educational advantages relative to regional counterparts not have meant certain success? Rather, the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions revealed by contrast that Iran's Green Movement seems to have come to a point of relative stagnation.

But this has little if anything to do with whether or not social media are being used (effectively), and everything to do with the differences between Iran and its co-regionals; e.g. the reformist leadership, the composition of the movement, the structure and power of the state, existing support for the establishment, relationship to the West, the people's past experience with revolution, the demands of protesters, and their links to organized labor, etc. Developing our own narratives of the internet based in hypotheses drawn from experiences (for example the proposed blackout-protest hypothesis) is an integral part of the power struggle over new media and internet technologies.

Looking at how people not only use, but perceive the internet and how these perceptions are shaped by certain media narratives, will bring us closer to grasping the internet's (potential) power in social movements, civil society, and democratic change. We also need to take seriously the impact that new media have on people's experiences, interpretations, and reactions to the messages they consume through it, acknowledging the new possibilities, genres, and relationships taking shape.

Older media have played important roles in social movements in the past; the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran was significantly facilitated by cassette tapes circulated subversively among the people. However, it was never asserted as a "Cassette Tape Revolution," protesters did not hold up signs and banners thanking their tape players, and graffiti of tapes did not adorn Tehran walls; as far as I know,

nor did that of cellphones or email in the recent revolts. How can we understand this if not as evidence of our changing relationships with new media through emerging and dynamic narratives?

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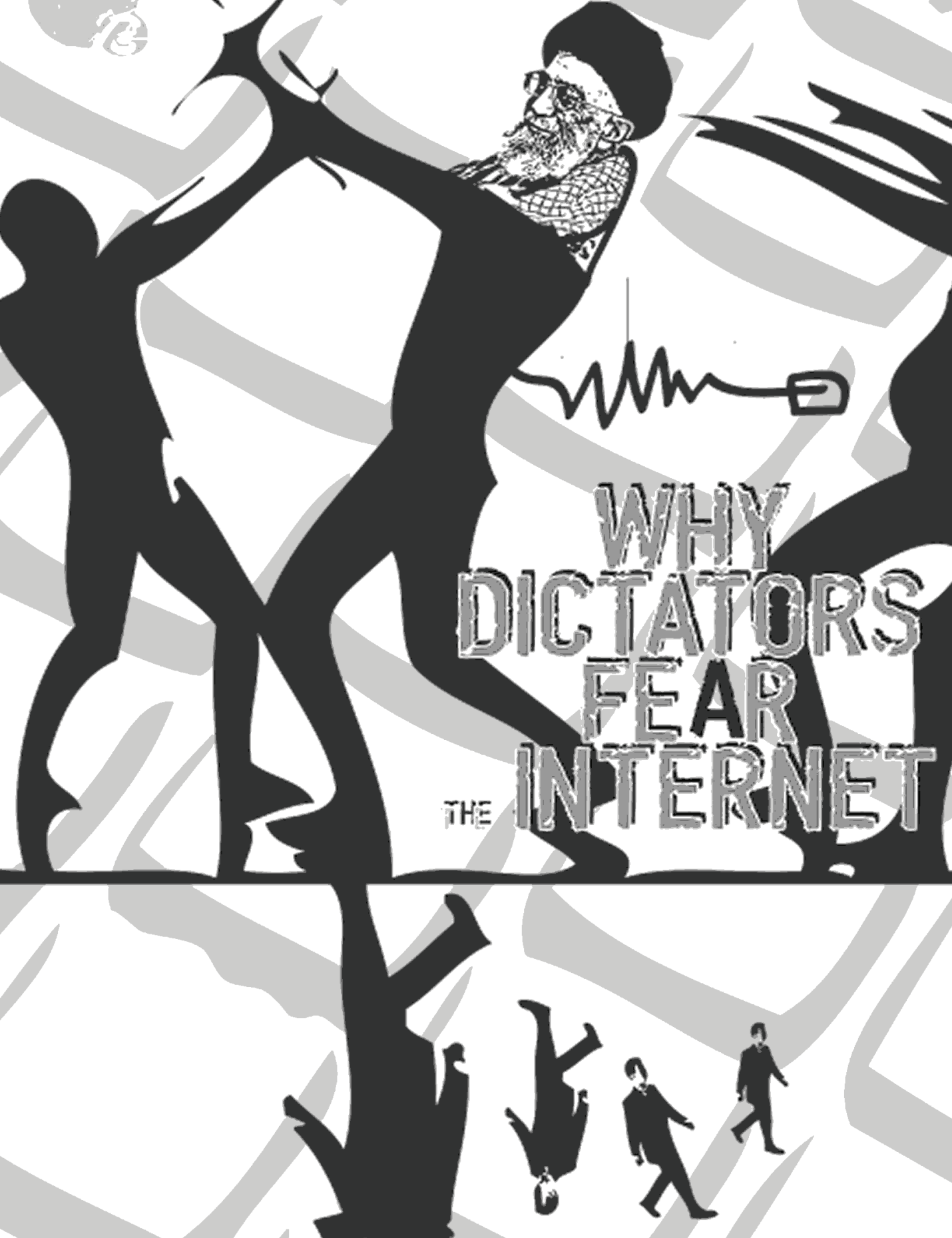
WHY
DICTATORS
FEAR
THE INTERNET

TWO FACES OF REVOLUTION: (OR, WHY DICTATORS FEAR THE INTERNET)

By Linda Herrera

The events in Tunisia and Egypt have riveted the region and the world. The eruptions of people power have shaken and taken down the seeming unbreakable edifices of dictatorship. (At the time of writing Mubarak has not formally acknowledged that he has been toppled, but the force of the movement is too powerful and determined to fathom any other outcome). Events are moving at breakneck speed and a new narrative for the future is swiftly being written. In the throes of a changing future it merits returning to the stories of two young men, the two faces that stoked the flames of revolution thanks to the persistence of on-line citizen activists who spread their stories. For in the tragic circumstances surrounding their deaths are keys to understanding what has driven throngs of citizens to the streets.

Mohammed Bouazizi has been dubbed "the father of Arab revolution"; a father indeed despite his young years and state of singlehood[1] (). Some parts of his life are by now familiar. This 26 year old who left school just short of finishing high school (he was NOT a college graduate as many new stories have been erroneously reporting) and worked in the informal economy as a vendor selling fruits and vegetable to support his widowed mother and five younger siblings. Overwhelmed by the burden of fines, debts, the humiliation of being serially harassed and beaten by police officers, and the indifference of government authorities to redress his grievances, he set himself on fire. His mother insists that though his poverty was crushing, it was the recurrence of humiliation and injustice that drove him to take his life. The image associated with Mohammed Bouazizi is not that of a young man's face, but of a body in flames on a public sidewalk. His self-immolation occurred in front of the local municipal building where he sought, but never received, justice.[2]

The story of 28 year old Egyptian, Khaled Said, went viral immediately following his death by beating on June 6, 2010. Two photos of him circulated the blogosphere [3] and social networking sites. One was a portrait of his gentle face and soft eyes coming out of a youthful grey hooded sweatshirt; the face of an everyday male youth. The accompanying photo was of the bashed and bloodied face on the corpse of a young man. Though badly disfigured, the image held enough resemblance to the pre-tortured Khaled to decipher that the two faces belonged to the same person. The events leading to Khaled's killing originated when he posted a video of two police officers allegedly dividing the spoils of a drug bust. This manner of citizen journalism has become commonplace since 2006. Youths across the region have been emboldened by a famous police corruption case of 2006. An activist posted a video on YouTube of two police officers sodomizing and whipping a minibus driver, Emad El Kabeer. It not only incensed the public and disgraced the perpetrators, but led to their criminal prosecution. On June 6, 2010, as Khaled Said was sitting in his local internet cafe in Alexandria two policemen accosted him and asked him for his I.D. which he refused to produce. They proceeded to drag him away and allegedly beat him to his death as he pleaded for his life. The officers claimed that Khaled died of suffocation when he tried to swallow a package of marijuana to conceal drug possession. But the power of

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1   http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/jan/29/egypt-mubarak-tunisia-palestine

2   see http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/01/201111684242518839.html
3   http://www.arabist.net/blog/2010/6/14/the-murder-of-khaled-said.html

photographic evidence combined with eyewitness accounts and popular knowledge of scores of cases of police brutality left no doubt in anyone's mind that he was senselessly and brutally murdered by the police, those very civil servants entrusted to protect them.

Mohammed Bouazizi was not the first person to resort to suicide by self immolation out of desperation, there has been an alarming rise in such incidents in different Arab countries. And Khaled Said is sadly one of scores of citizens who have been tortured, terrorized, and killed by police with impunity. But the stories of these two young men are the ones that have captured the popular imagination, they have been game changers.

For the youth of Egypt and Tunisia, the largest cohort of young people ever in their countries, the martyrdoms of Khaled Said and Mohamed Bouaziz represent an undeniable tipping point, the breaking of the fear barrier. The youth have banned together as a generation like never before and are crying out collectively, "enough is enough!" to use the words of a 21 year old friend, Sherif, from Alexandria. The political cartoon of Khaled Said in his signature hoodie shouting to the Intelligence Chief, also popularly known "Torturer in chief" and now Mubarak's Vice President, to "wake up Egypt" perfectly exemplifies this mood (from the Facebook group, We are all Khaled Said). No longer will the youth cower to authority figures tainted by corruption and abuses. These illegitimate leaders will cower to them. The order of things will change.

And so on January 25, 2011, inspired by the remarkable and inspiring revolution in Tunisia that toppled the twenty-three year reign of the dictatorship of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Egyptian youth saw it was possible to topple their dictator, Hosni Mubarak, of 31 years. Activists used different on-line platforms, most notably the April 6 Youth Movement and the "We are all Khaled Said" Facebook group to organize a national

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uprising against "Torture, Corruption, Poverty, and Unemployment."

It is not arbitrary that civil rights, as exemplified in torture and corruption (recall Khaled Said), topped the list of grievances, followed by economic problems. For youth unemployment and underemployment will, under any regime, be among the greatest challenges of the times.

No one could have anticipated that this initial call would heed such mass and inclusive participation. Youths initially came to the streets braving tanks, rubber bullets, tear gas (much of which is made in the US and part of US military aid, incidentally), detention, and even death. And they were joined by citizens of all persuasions and life stages; children, youth, elderly, middle aged, female, male, middle class, poor, Muslim, Christians, Atheists.

Contrary to a number of commentators in news outlets in North America and parts of Europe the two revolutions overtaking North Africa are not motivated by Islamism and there are no compelling signs that they will be co-opted in this direction. Such analyses are likely to be either ideologically or self driven, or misinformed. In fact, Islam has not figured whatsoever into the stories of Bouazizi and Said. These are inclusive freedom movements for civic, political, and economic rights. To understand what is driving the movement and what will invariably shape the course of reforms in the coming period we need to return to these young men. Their evocative if tragic deaths speak reams about the erosion of rights and accountability under decades of corrupt dictatorship and the rabid assault on people's dignity and livelihoods. They remind us of the desperate need to restore a political order that is just and an economic order that is fair. Mohamed Bouazizi and Khaled Said have unwittingly helped to pave a way forward, and to point the way towards the right, the just side of history.

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AS STRONG AS OUR SIGNAL: AN EVOLVING NOVELTY

By Mana Mostatabi

To many social media is a novelty: something for parents to worry about, for kids to abuse, for school administrators to lock-down, for friends to keep in touch, relatives to over-share, and even now, for e-guilt from those of us with parents tech-savvy enough to join.

Thinking back, there wasn't really a sudden emergence of online networks; rather (like most sustainable networks) they grew organically. It's funny to think that AOL chat-rooms, MySpace profiles, and angsty LiveJournal entries would be the new forums for creating and sharing.

In the last ten years I've gone from pleasantly excited when I received a non-chain letter e-mail to being mildly annoyed by the onslaught of noise and distraction from Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, Twitter, Linkedin, IRC, Skype, Xbox Live, and Google. Every action from every friend is a simultaneous alert, flash, bleep, bouncing icon that makes following a single narrative almost impossible. It's not that we can't tell stories, it's that there are too many being told, at the same time, shouted over one another, in the same channel that often seems more like a cesspool than a fountain of knowledge.

What happens to all those narratives we post, like, re-tweet, forward, share, forward, and paste after we're done with them? Is that narrative, that thin line of story, doomed to thirty seconds of relevance before drowning in the Internet's Styx? I often wonder how many people actually read the links they re-tweet. And yes, sometimes the stars will align so that the right post timing combined with an emotionally packed title can drive people to do more than hit share.

The truth is that Internet narratives will never rest as comfortably as those sitting neatly in between book covers, with the great luxury of being picked up, put down, and remembered.

Knowing this, how can we ensure, then, that the narratives do not fall into the cracks of the Internet? How can we strengthen our stories, and not just share them, but also use them to further discourse? How can we **add** something to the narrative rather than just continue adding to the noise?

A Not-So-New Phenomenon

Iranians took to the streets en masse after the 2009 elections, with students and union workers protesting alongside bazaar merchants and women cloaked in chadors. Ordinary Iranians evolved into citizen journalists as they captured the brutal violence on camera phones and shared the grainy videos on YouTube.

That many of the significant events of the 2009 election protests were organized, broadcast, and disseminated through social-networking sites and mobile phones became a testament to the potential energy of online media.

Social media's kinetic energy became more apparent after the 2009 election – it wasn't invented because of it. Iranian activists have long used internet platforms to engage, discuss, and organize; to petition and further their goals, aspirations, and demands; and to disseminate information and offer the Iranian people an alternative to the State's propaganda machines.

Iranians have evolved their networks beyond dissemination; the real power now comes from the networks' power in delivering a narrative that drives action. Iranian activists are among the most savvy in the battle for rights online, despite aggressive monitoring and outright oppression by the regime's Cyber Police.

Iran's government has become increasingly adept at limiting e-mail and telephone communications, especially during times of heightened tension. But Iranians themselves have also become better adept at circumventing censors and filters. The regime's increasing uneasiness about Internet communication platforms hints at its fear of the power of social media and the potential for "netizens" not

only to share information, but its capacity to move in concert with the people.

The One Million Signature Campaign

The One Million Signatures Campaign, a female-driven grassroots movement, began as an effort to collect one million signatures for a petition calling for an end to Iran's writ-in-the-law gender discrimination. Initially the campaign involved (mostly female) activists wandering the streets collecting signatures; even this subdued activism was deemed a threat by the regime.

Despite authorities breaking up events, shutting down real and virtual media of expression, and detaining activists for "endangering state security," the Campaign has not only survived, but continues to flourish across Iran, with solidarity networks emerging in countries worldwide.

Parvin Ardalan, a founding member of the Campaign, has said that it was because they lost their print platforms that they turned to the Internet: "We created a new world for ourselves in cyberspace."

Much of its sustainment is no doubt due to its web-based advocacy platform, Change for Equality. What started as the Campaign's communication avenue has since evolved beyond sharing content and into a platform affording the everyday Iranian (and these days, the diaspora and its allies) a platform for action.

The drawback to web platforms, to take a point from Parvin Ardalan, is that not everyone consumes media online. And let's be honest, even if they do, there's no real guarantee that the consumption leaves a lasting impact – it's a share at best, often drowned and buried before Facebook registers the Like.

The Diaspora's Use

Iranian activists have built platforms where aspirations are born and ideas not only shared, but evocative enough to drive its participants to action. (Think of the One Million Signature Campaign's use of an online petition to help supplement its on the ground grassroots work). While Iranians have managed to harness social media to platforms that drive discourse & further the narrative, and are evocative enough to get a bazaar merchant to sign a petition for gender equality, the diaspora seems a little behind, stuck in a circle of Re-tweets and Recommendations. There is a need to differentiate between social media platforms driven by content and those platforms that push information around. We cannot confuse writing an article with sharing it.

These sometimes noisy social platforms are integral for they let activists everywhere work beyond the confines of geography, funding, accessibility or the 365-day-a-year calendar. The major benefit of using digital platforms is just that: the lack of confines. Take for example, the case of death row Kurdish prisoner, Habibollah Latifi, whom the regime attempted to execute during Christmas 2010. Instead, because the Internet knows no holiday, office hours, and never closes its front doors, thousands of activists were able to send tens-of-thousands of e-mails and tweets to influential world leaders, attracting just enough international attention to have played a role in the stay.

The Iranian diaspora has remained politically apathetic over the last thirty-some years, its budding activist use of these once novelty venues has hit a rare (and sometimes harmonious) chord, even if limited to Facebook events and spammy mailing lists.

While I'm fairly certain we'll all forever be witness to streams of wedding pictures, baby photos, and Foursquare check-ins, even the slightest act of "clicktivism" – changing a profile picture to highlight an issue, retweeting information casually, or hitting "Like" – creates a ripple in the bandwidth

> Iran's government has become increasingly adept at limiting e-mail and telephone communications, especially during times of heightened tension.

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stream. The problem is not casual clicking, but the short length of time the ripple remains.

A fancy iMovie video uploaded to YouTube will only go so far. So you get 100,000 views… then what? Networks must figure out how to disseminate the content in a way that urges action. How can a network urge action, online or IRL, after sharing a thought provoking article, Facebook post or Twitter update? More importantly, how can a network cut through the Internet cacophony?

The question remains then, not if the internet has created a meeting place (yes), but how to effectively wade through the internet's clamor and put forth a message strong enough to evoke the ordinary internet user to action? How can we learn from Iranians to use social media platforms and networks to further a narrative while urging action? How do we nudge newly mobilized activist networks to care for just a little longer about the issues they share? How can we make them care just one click more?

Second Life

One unlikely online network has emerged via an internet-based game known as Second Life. Second Life, launched on June 23, 2003, is a virtual world where users ("residents") interact, socialize, participate in individual and group activities, and travel ("teleport") throughout the still growing virtual world ("the grid"). Second Life residents use the virtual world as a platform to express themselves creatively via art exhibits, live music, and theater.

I won't deny the dorkiness surrounding creating a character and wandering around a 3D timesuck of a world where the real dangers involve either wandering into a nightmare inducing community or spending real life currency on hair for your virtual character. Despite this, Second Life has attracted a surprisingly large and diverse audience.

Legitimate companies have set-up virtual workplaces that allow employees to meet, hold events, conduct training sessions, and prototype

new products. Religious organizations, universities, news media, and governments have also carved out niches in the virtual world. Egypt-based Islam Online, for example, set-up a virtual space where both Muslims and non-Muslims can experience the ritual of Hajj, before making a real life pilgrimage to Mecca.

A growing trend for governments is establishing a presence in Second Life by opening virtual embassies (with many located on "Diplomacy Island"). Maldives was the first country to open an embassy (with its only real service apparently being a virtual ambassador that discussed visas with residents). Sweden followed suit in 2007, using the virtual embassy to promote the country's image and culture rather than provide a service platform. Over the next year, Estonia, Colombia, Serbia, Macedonia, and the Philippines all opened virtual embassies.

> Second Life is full of thriving internet-based advocacy networks.

Second Life is also full of thriving internet-based advocacy networks. The SL Humanism group is among the most active in the virtual world and holds weekly discussions every Sunday.

After Iran's 2009 election, a network of SL residents was moved to set-up a virtual location dedicated to the struggle of the Iranian people. Residents gathered over the course of the months following to browse news, read real time Twitter feeds, learn how to get involved, and even watch full-length documentaries and YouTube videos as a group in a virtual amphitheater.

The leading organizers took it one step further and built-out a "Virtual Evin Action Center" that drives residents to take real life action by sending electronic letters or printing-and-mailing materials to diplomats, officials, and leaders worldwide. The self-proclaimed "3D social networking environment for human rights activism" has effectively developed into a virtual space where players both raise awareness (sharing) and urge real life action (caring).

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Here are a number of Second Life actions to review:

Rev Magdalen's Blog:

http://revmagdalen.blogspot.com/

Entre Nous Island Blog:

http://entrenousisland.wordpress.com/

Second Life Takes Real Life Action:

http://12june.org/?p=835

Global Day of Action on SL – 2009:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QV4Grt7zZ3E

For a Cause

While YouTube has definitely been paramount in sharing, a new AV tool has recently emerged known as "Animoto." This web application essentially produces videos from user-selected photos, clips, and music to convey a message with the "right balance of information and emotional connection." That is, in limiting users' video lengths, amount of text, and number of visuals, Animoto actually helps activists achieve just this.

Animoto, which capitalizes on the power of social networks, helps spread the message not just via the video, but also with a chance to act at the end. Where YouTube video narratives end, and often stay ended, Animoto offers viewers an-end-of-video "Act Now!" button, which the video editor links to a relevant online action. It's become an attractive way to create and further a narrative that not only spreads a message, but also drives actions by taking into account standard attention spans and using the short videos to connect the viewer to the issue, evoke an emotion, and immediately offer action at the end of the video when the viewer is – for lack of a better term – most "vulnerable."

Example Videos

http://animoto.com/play/Fr1d6iO0ZZpEjAWU80MhLQ

http://animoto.com/play/oMKeyAKu3CeBr6gOtOBIlA

The (Sometimes Polluted) Information Stream

The challenge now is not just to invoke emotions and make people care for thirty seconds, but to harness the standard attention span to drive action after the initial Like, Retweet, or Share. How can we BUILD a narrative that not only furthers the existing plotline, but also drives people to react to it? How can we harness the new energy created in those online spaces. How do we take a powerful tool and fully realize what it can do? How to make it more lasting? How do we not only "Digg" something, but keep it "dug"?

How can we, as an ever expanding internet network of activists, reach beyond the limitations of traditional activism, and the almost too limitless and too cluttered world of online activism, to find an effective way to take online action in a way that will affect real life change? How can we mitigate the tug of war for our attention, the broadcasts shoved into our faces, the murky, polluted stream of information, and realize that for all our good intentions, fascinating stories, and revs to action, we – our stories, our aspirations, our movements – remain only as strong as our signal?

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CREATING SOCIAL CAPITAL IN POLITICALLY RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENTS: THE VIRTUAL SPHERE AND IRAN'S WEBLOGISTAN

By Christina Parisa Ashtary

The public sphere can be best summed up as the "constellation of communicative spaces in a society that permits the circulation of information, ideas, debates, and the formation of political will and public opinion," serving as the breeding grounds for a vibrant civil society.[1] In open democracies, civic connectivity and engagement has produced a shared sense of collective trust and community norms, bounded through organization and collective action. While civic engagement in the public sphere is not always produced by political motivations, the very essence of social interconnectedness, collective force, and influence through social change will always carry political undertones.

To preserve power and political stability, many repressive regimes have taken measures to prohibit extensive civic engagement and bar the development of a free, civil society. In cases where engagement in the physical public sphere may be limited, a rise in virtual space has provided alternative mode for collective organization, linking closed societies to an open sphere of civic dialogue. The question remains then, can civic engagement in the virtual sphere allow repressed societies to create social capital equivalent to that seen in the open, democratic physical sphere? As we will examine later in this article, the power behind Iran's Weblogistan has

been playing a crucial role in developing ideologies, increasing interconnectedness, and strengthening social ties. Through the weblog and similar mediums of virtual communication, technology presents an alternative to traditional public space in engaging individuals, connecting society, and developing social trust.

Understanding Social Capital

In the same way one thinks of human capital as the valued knowledge and experience of an individual, social capital refers the value produced between relationships in society. Defining social capital, Putnam emphasized its "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit."[2] Discussing the strengths among social connections, Granovetter established that strong ties relying on a consensual two-way relationship yielded higher levels of interpersonal trust, yet these ties were most often constrained to a smaller network with a limited social span. On the other hand, weak ties depended only on a mutual point of contact and could penetrate far deeper into social networks, yet due to distance, held less potential for creating strong linkages of interpersonal trust. When brought together by a mutual bond in a collective environment, weak ties strengthened their interconnectedness through interaction and face-to-face contact, in what Granovetter referred to as the bridging of social capital.[3] Through this process of bridging connections under a collective interest, diverse communities could then become integrated, cohesive social units through a social network.

Repression of the Public Sphere: The Islamic Republic of Iran

Since the establishment of the Islamic theocracy in 1979, public spaces in Iranian society have been severely restricted. As it is stated in the Iranian constitution, the government allows for a "healthy encounter of different ideas," but clearly does not permit any "propagation of destructive and anti-Islamic practices."[4] Realistically, a fine line exists between what is tolerated and what is forbidden by

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> The anonymity of the virtual sphere serves as a positive influence in the Weblogistan.

the state. Immediately seeking to repress individuality and lessen the threat of opposition, post-revolutionary Iran embarked on a decade of unity (Vahdat) to homogenize society and craft an obedient and controlled civil society.[5] As Ebrahimi remarks of this period:

> Large and crowded squares of the city were transformed to places in which any appearance, behavior and presence had to follow a pattern, consisting of bans and permissions. On the precise moment that the moral police was installed in the public spaces, all women tried to fix their hejab, girls and boys distanced themselves, laughter and loud voices were controlled, everything entered into the order of "andaruni.*[6]

Using citizens to enforce codes of behavior

During this time, the public sphere was politicized as the state forced civil society to closed, private spaces.[7] To maintain power and legitimacy, the government followed popular methods for preserving authoritarian rule, limiting the development on the "self" and thereby inhibiting a fundamental building block of civil society. In addition to closing the physical public sphere, Iran successfully impeded on interpersonal trust through the strong societal emphasis on morality and Islamic ethical codes. In reviewing the government reliance on community policing, Ebrahimi notes that a strongly fortified traditional culture overpowered any need for state-sponsored surveillance initiatives, with everyday citizens enforcing the ethical codes of the government beyond the capabilities of the moral police.[8]

Nascent civil society

Despite Iran's diminishing civic culture, the Khatami presidency from 1997-2005 marked some significant democratic reforms and the re-emergence of civil society. Increasing press freedoms, Khatami allowed reformist media sources to flourish in hopes of serving as counterinfluence to Iran's closed political structure, and although a far cry from an independent media sector, the ease in restrictions allowed civil society to increase its presence in the public sphere.[9] While this initiative lasted for only a few years, civil society had already began to reclaim the public space, and by 2000, Iran was estimated to have between 1,500 and 2,000 civil society organizations.10 In a sign of the changing times, these organizations began to increasingly place focus on issues of modern concern including women's issues, which would have, in previous times, drawn much negative attention and government control.

Civil society is forced back into the closet

While the country saw a brief period of eased restrictions under the Khatami administration and embarked on a gradual path to develop civil society, liberalization under the reformist movement was soon put to a halt by government crackdowns from the conservative right. The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 was marked with tight government restrictions and suppression of civil liberties. Once again, people were forced out of public spaces and sought refuge in private, hidden spaces. Abolishing many of Iran's civil society organizations, the government heavily regulated activities of remaining organizations, violating the "non-governmental" aspect and creating a blur between free, civil society, and state influence and control. Yet, while the Iranian government tightened its grip on civil society and forced the masses out of this newly acquired space, it underestimated the increasing influence of the internet as a virtual public sphere.

The Rise of Weblogistan and a Virtual Society

In the past decade, the number of internet users in Iran has dramatically increased, with an estimated 38 percent of the country currently engaging in online mediums.[11] The most common usage of online engagement can be seen in the blogosphere, or "Weblogistan," as it is commonly referred to in Iran. In 2001, the introduction of a Persian character typing system combined with increased national access to the internet led to a drastic rise in

Iranian bloggers.

With the fourth largest population of internet bloggers in the world, Iranians use blogging as a platform for personal expression, political commentary and debate, and open, unrestricted discussion.[12] Where suppression of the physical public sphere has prevented personal expression and identity, this new virtual space provided as an outlet for society to resume in civic engagement. Journalists flocked to the blogosphere as a new medium to replace government-suppressed news and print media, while on a wider scale, Iran's youth population used the platform as a vehicle for self expression, political commentary, and uncensored forms of discussion.[13] For an increasingly homogenous society adhering to government standards to limit self expression in the physical public space, access to the internet has provided a revolutionary way for citizens to defy oppression and develop a sense of self through an otherwise restricted virtual public sphere.

Trust transfer

The anonymity of the virtual sphere serves as a positive influence in the Weblogistan. Because revealing one's identity can be a risk to personal security, a significant amount of Iranian bloggers have taken on aliases or pseudonyms, protecting themselves from regime surveillance. Additionally, the faceless space of the virtual sphere has particularly empowered women, giving them a platform to surpass cultural traditions and deprived physical freedom which has prevented them from fully engaging in traditional space.[14] Despite the anonymity available in internet engagement, many Iranian bloggers use their real names and identities, providing an added credibility to the testament of the blogger. [15] There has been a demonstrative amount of trust transferred over from the physical public sphere, where reputations of well-known Iranian social figures facilitate social trust in these virtual communities.[16]

The virtual sphere has allowed the community to transcend geographical boundaries on a macro-level and develop social relationships with members outside of Iran. From notable Iranian expatriates to

everyday migrants to societal liberators, the breadth of this community has created dialogue between a very diverse set of members and has thus bridged ties spanning across continents. In connecting the outside world with civil society in Iran, the virtual space has also allowed a global population to contribute additional thoughts, ideas, and human resources. The delivery of social empowerment tools to expand the capacity of the Iran-based network is one example of physical resources made available though the virtual space, where organizations like Tavaana.org and ArsehSevom.net have provided learning courses and information specifically relevant to Iran to further empower civil society.17 Without the access given through this virtual space, such initiatives would never physically reach Iranian society.

Creating Social Capital through a Virtual Association

As a virtual community marked by commentary and online interaction, the Weblogistan has bred interconnectivity among Iran's virtual dwellers, establishing the notion of a virtual civic association. Blogs have taken political and non-political forms,

> The virtual sphere offers new avenues for engaging in a public sphere.

and have consequently created dialogue and facilitated engagement along both trajectories, as would community associations in the traditional sphere. Contrary to physical realities, Ebrahimi reveals that in most cases, criteria for establishing levels of social trust with Iranian bloggers is based less on physical identity and more on factors like age of weblog, frequency of posts, number of links referring to the blog, and the manner in which the writer interacts with other bloggers.[18] All of these characteristics illustrate the way in which virtual society has developed a governing system of rules for interaction and connectivity. Reputations are gained based on a weblogger's status, weak ties are connected via online linking referrals, and interpersonal trust is gained

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> A fine line exists between what is tolerated and what is forbidden by the state.

through repeated virtual interaction. In this sense, the Weblogistan as a virtual association can meet many of the requirements of the physical, traditional association in harnessing social capital and increasing connectivity among society.

Driving Forces Behind Iran's Virtual Civil Society

Reflecting back on the reformist attempts to re-open the physical public sphere, the momentum used in building up Iran's virtual civil society can be attributed to the brief liberalization of press and media and the expansion of civil society organizations during the Khatami era. The virtual sphere gained strength while these physical efforts were still active, allowing for continued access to a public platform after the re-closure of public spaces. As Abdo notes, the virtual sphere was critical in harnessing social capital because of its timely ascendance among a newly engaged Iran, serving as an even more powerful platform for self expression free from state regulation and control.[19]

Additionally, some degrees of trust present in the virtual sphere may be attributed to larger narratives floating throughout the public and virtual space. Iran's Green Movement which gained legitimacy as the platform for presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi in the June 2009 elections saw a great deal of success through online mediums and mobilization efforts. While many engaged virtually to organize mass demonstrations, there was a degree of trust based on the identification and knowledge of physical movement leaders and supporters seen in the streets and on television. Ascribing these physically verifiable characteristics to online efforts served as a motivating force for creating levels of trust in the virtual sphere at this time.

Iran and Repression of the Virtual Sphere

The virtual sphere offers new avenues for engaging in a public sphere. Yet just as government has tried to suppress activities physical space, it has carried over its authoritarian control to the virtual sphere possessing one of the most extensive web filtering systems in the world.[20] In a rating done by the OpenNet Initiative, Iran scored on the extreme end of web filtering in all four web category classifications.[21] In restricting public space, the government has on several occasions shut down access to key internet sites and has been able to immobilize political associating around crucial demonstration times. Again as in the public sphere, the state has engaged in internet surveillance techniques to monitor online activities and discussions. Current tactics by the regime include drastically slowing down internet connection speed, restricting access to crucial communication sites for social media, news, and email. Additionally, the Iranian government has taken restriction and surveillance initiatives into their own hands by developing surveillance and censorship technologies under a national capacity.[22] Regardless of these strategies to suppress the virtual sphere, Iranians are still actively engaging online, finding ways around government blockades and surveillance. Since the internet lacks the physical element of the public space, censoring and restrictions have been harder to execute, especially with access to proxy servers which circumnavigate government censorship.

Conclusion

In restricted societies like Iran, the virtual sphere serves as an alternative to traditional space first by providing a mode of engagement. Through the use of expressive platforms like weblogging, individuals are empowered to establish a unique identity and further develop their personal and collective ideologies, which would otherwise be forbidden in the physical public sphere. Finally, the virtual sphere as an online community of discussion can foster interpersonal relationships and increase social interconnectivity. The idea of bringing together collective interests and building social capital through virtual sphere is still a

relatively new phenomenon, thus the full effects and outcomes of this process are still being understood. Yet from this research, several key conclusions can be made:

Like traditional methods of social organization, the virtual sphere connects weak ties, bridges social capital, and builds stronger bonds. The virtual sphere facilitates an increase in weak ties, which alone are not strong enough to form significant social capital between members of society. The main achievement of the virtual sphere is the ability to foster these weak ties into more formidable, trusting relationships. In the same way traditional community associations pool together weak ties through points of mutual interest, virtual associations bridge these connections under a collective identity, as seen in the Weblogistan.

Social capital is no longer solely a product of the physical public sphere. In regards to the overall state of civil society, it is clear that interpersonal trust can be a produced in the virtual space, without direct physical contact or face to face interaction. Replacing physical contact, establishment of new social norms governing the virtual community has allowed for the creation of social capital via Iran's Weblogistan. This revolutionary finding suggests that telecommunication technologies which in many ways are less regulated by government have a high likelihood of connecting civic communities in repressed societies. While it is hard to say how this capital will measure when carried back over to the physical realm, the significance of virtual connections lie building capacity of trust among a repressed society.

Social capital from trust networks and political circles can be transferred to, and expanded upon in the virtual sphere. When examining the virtual sphere as a source for creating politically motivated social capital, it very well may be that some of the social networks and degrees of interpersonal trust may rely on a basic, minimal degree of networking done through physical networks. Online organizing and cooperation through virtual platforms may not

> Blogs have taken political and non-political forms, and have consequently created dialogue and facilitated engagement along both trajectories, as would community associations in the traditional sphere.

reflect the point where engagement initially conspired, but rather where physical networks come to organize under the radar of government officials.

While the virtual sphere has limited reach, it is gradually increasing connectivity within society. One of the main problems with the virtual sphere is limiting its audience to only those with access to the internet. While over one third of Iran has internet connectivity, there is still a large gap in societal representation. On a positive note however, enhancing social capital within this smaller target audience via the virtual sphere may create a greater sense of civic confidence and expanded ideological knowledge, which can then be shared in the physical realm though tighter-knit social, family, and trust networks.

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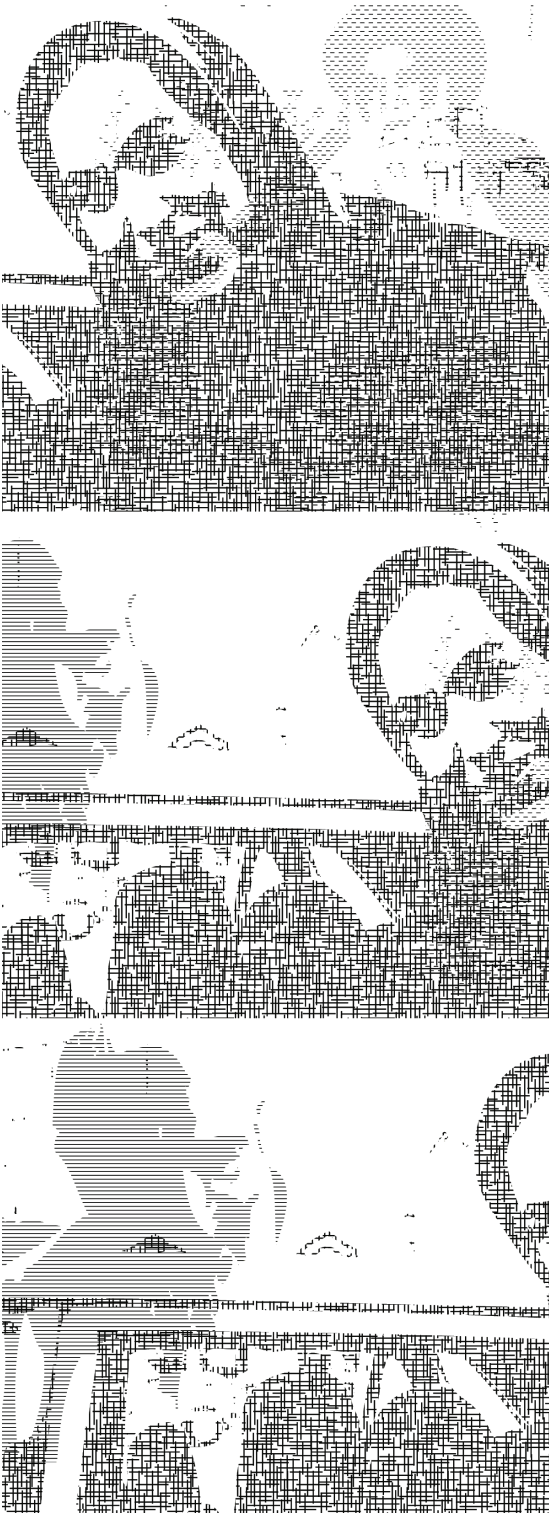
IRAN'S REFORMISTS AND ACTIVISTS: INTERNET EXPLOITERS

By Babak Rahimi and Elham Gheytanchi

It has become increasingly accepted that the Iranian presidential election of 2005, which brought to power hardline politicians like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, caused a major decline of dissent. Under Mohammad Khatami's presidency, Iranians, especially the youth, confronted the regime with the hope of transforming the autocratic political system into a more democratic one. The current public, however, remains largely indifferent to politics, despite being subjected to the crushing domination of increasingly authoritarian rule. This political culture of apathy is mainly, it is argued, a by-product of the Khatami regime's failure to meet earlier public demands for democratic change.

Although their 2005 electoral triumph provided the hardliners with a golden opportunity to inhibit dissent, it failed to solve most of the inherent flaws of the Islamic Republic and, consequently, left the root of dissent very much intact. As a result, in the context of mounting economic and social problems, including ongoing tension with the United States, Iran's theocracy continues to face an increasingly dissatisfied population. Indeed, as the state continues to deny the public's aspirations for civil rights and democracy, Iranian dissident groups have persisted in fighting back, using alternative forums of communication, such as the Internet, to facilitate their expressions of discontent.

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THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Online activism has served as an extension of Iranian dissident groups' channels of expression, allowing them to circumvent the established propaganda mechanisms and more directly exchange information and mobilize protests with other social movements.

In the context of these burgeoning social movements, the Internet has become a powerful platform for opposition. Online activism has served as an extension of Iranian dissident groups' channels of expression, allowing them to circumvent the established propaganda mechanisms and more directly exchange information and mobilize protests with other social movements. The result is a sophisticated operation allowing for the development of solidarity and sympathy from around the globe in a way that would have been difficult, if not impossible, with traditional means of communication.

While Iran's leaders have been trying to avoid Internet-induced unrest since 2001 by, among other things, limiting citizens' use of the new technology, they are slowly accepting the reality that the Internet today has come to pose a serious threat to their power. It is clear that the government will not be able to counter this threat with the ease and effectiveness that has traditionally marked its response to other means of communication.

The political use of the Internet by two of Iran's distinct social movements, women's-rights activists and the reformist ulama (clerics), reveals the innovative force of this new medium. It demonstrates how the new technology can enable the formation of new civil spheres, or "virtual domains," to defy authoritarian control over the ideas of civil society and symbols of justice. These civil spheres constitute simultaneous symbolic constructions and regulative judgments in the name of civil rights and democratic rule. Such "civil repairs," as the sociologist Jeffrey Alexander has described them, provide a model of values for broadening civil solidarity to which the Iranian activists and the reformists look as they voice their demands. (1)

REFORMIST ULAMA AND THE INTERNET

Since the founding of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the reformist ulama's opposition to the ideology of velayat-e faqih (rule by an Islamic jurist), which vested ultimate authority in the unaccountable and unelected office of jurisconsult (vali-faqih) as the "guardian" of the people, has posed a serious threat to the autocracy's legitimacy. These nonestablishment clerics have criticized the absolute authority of the mujtahid (Muslim scholar, a precondition for the office of vali-faqih) advocated by the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhallah Khomeini (1902-89), as "un-Islamic." They have also identified this vision for a nation, which requires clerical sovereignty over day-to-day state and political affairs, as the reason for the corruption of Islam. (2)

In Iran, the enterprise of democratic-minded ulama has produced a reconceptualization of religious authority that promotes neither autocracy nor theocracy.

Dissenting Ulama

Although not a monolithic community of scholars, these clerics have brought a powerful reformist discourse into the post-revolutionary political culture of the religious community by identifying the theocratic foundation of velayat-e faqih as tyrannical and undemocratic. Such a foundation, they argue, inherently contradicts the flexible and pluralistic spirit of the Islamic faith. Through their religious networks, composed of seminaries (hawza), representatives and young jurists, the reformist ulama have succeeded in disseminating this and other anti-establishment views, as well as pushing for a shift in the conception and practice of Islam in the Iranian political sphere.

A gradual shift in the discourse and practice of transnational Shii authority is taking place, led by prominent figures such as Muhammad Husain Fadlallah (1935-2010) in Lebanon, Ayatollah Ali Sistani (b. 1930) in Iraq, and a number of Iranian dissident ulama like Hussain Kazemeini Boroujerdi (b. 1954),Hassan Yousefi-Eshkevari (b. 1949), Hojjat al-Islam Mohsen Kadivar (b. 1959), Yosuf Sanei (b. 1929) and Mohammad Mojtahid Shabestari (b.

1936).In Iran, the enterprise of democratic-minded ulama has produced a reconceptualization of religious authority that promotes neither autocracy nor theocracy. These dissenting ulama demand "Islamic justice" through democratic ideals of accountability, pluralism and civil rights–including women's rights–backed by the Islamic ideals of piety, which they interpret as empowering a just political community.

Theirs is a religious tradition that assigns to a cleric the primary social roles of community leader and moral adviser.

Democratic Tradition of the Ulama

The idea that the lowest level of political involvement entails the highest form of religious piety has a long history in the scholarly circles led by Shaykh Mufid (d. 1022) and Khawaja Nasir-al-Din Tusi (d. 1274). These Shii scholars were among the first to call for the systematic teaching of Shii scholarship and the formation of the seminary institutions in the Iraqi city of Najaf. Theirs is a religious tradition that assigns to a cleric the primary social roles of community leader and moral adviser. The real authority of the ulama, according to this tradition, lies in the community: the ulama are the custodians of the common good, responsible for the welfare of orphans, widows and the poor during the long period of "occultation" (ghayba), from now until the end of time, while the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, is believed to be hidden from sight. (3) During the absence of Mahdi, who will eventually establish on earth the ultimate government of justice and peace, a jurist should keep his distance from any form of temporal power, as it is inherently illegitimate.

The central aim of the contemporary reformist ulama is to renew this tradition with an added emphasis on the popularly elected government as a guarantee against arbitrary power. The notion of separation between spiritual and temporal authority is central to this discourse, since it is in this division of power that citizens are able to find a balance between the divine and secular spheres of life. This particular structure of clerical-state relations was promoted in the writings of the pro-democracy ulama of the Constitutional Revolution (1906-11), which helped unleash one of the first constitutional revolutions on the continent of Asia. (4) Inspired by the works of influential clerics like Mohammad-Hossein Naini (d. 1936), who emphasized government accountability while still acknowledging Islam as a source of legislation, these reformist ulama now seek to revive the idea of popular sovereignty as a central ideal of Islamic governance and rescue religion from political micromanagement by the state.

Opposition to Clerical Authority over the State

The 1978-79 Islamic revolution radically altered the traditional status of the ulama. Khomeini's vision–that the clerics should be more than public agents of the Hidden Imam and should instead claim authority over state power–encountered opposition from some of the most senior ulama in the 1980s, most notably Ayatollah Shariatmadari (1905-86) and Ayatollah Mohammad Shirazi (1928-2001), who were placed under house arrest as a result of their opposition. (5) In the face of waves of opposition during the Islamic Republic's initial Jacobin phase (1979-88), the state clerics adopted various institutional attempts to tame the dissident ulama, especially the most senior ones, whose reach went beyond the borders of Iran and included countries like Iraq, Lebanon and Pakistan, where Tehran had strategic ambitions to spread its revolutionary brand of Shiism.

> A new means of communication was needed to circumvent their censorship, and that means of communication was the Internet.

With the aim of monopolizing religious discourse in Qom, conservative clerics either adopted "propagation" strategies or enforced legal measures to stifle dissent within the religious establishment. The propagation strategies were initiated in the early 1980s with the formation of new ideological centers, most notably the Dafiar-e Tablighat-e

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Islami-e Howzeh-ye Ilmiyeh-ye (The Office of Islamic Propaganda of the Scientific Seminary), which oversaw the propagation of Khomeini's version of Shiism in the seminary city of Qom. As dissension strengthened with the rise of execution of opponents and the uncertainty of a seemingly unending war with Iraq in the later half of 1980s, the state was forced to take harsher measures, such as the institutionalization of the official clerical court, the Special Court for the Clergy (SCC) in 1987, which operates outside of the civic judiciary and aims at stifling dissent from clerical circles by identifying and charging "counterrevolutionary" ulama for their opposition to the regime.

When Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was selected by the Assembly of Experts, a clerical body in charge of supervising and electing a supreme leader to succeed Khomenei in the summer of 1989, a number of senior clerics openly questioned his religious qualifications and credentials, as well as his authority to issue religious rulings.

Yet the reformist ulama continued their opposition. When Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was selected by the Assembly of Experts, a clerical body in charge of supervising and electing a supreme leader to succeed Khomenei in the summer of 1989, a number of senior clerics openly questioned his religious qualifications and credentials, as well as his authority to issue religious rulings. But Khamenei's succession led to the consolidation of the absolutist institution of the velayat-e faqih, which brought the seminaries in Qom under greater supervision by conservative clerics. The Election of Khatami

The 1997 presidential elections that marked the impressive victory of Hojatoleslam Mohamad Khatami, however, provided a new opportunity for the reformist ulama. The late 1990s saw a boom in dissident clerical writings in journals, newspapers and books. The works of clerics like Kadivar, Shabestari and Yosufi Eshkevari, which underwent a number of printed editions, unleashed a series of often-heated public debates on the role of religion in politics. (6) But, as the Iranian public sphere expanded with the relative easing of censorship restrictions under the Khatami government, the reformist ulama faced the harsh measures of the conservative judiciary against reformist print media. A new means of communication was needed to circumvent their censorship, and that means of communication was the Internet.

The Uluma and the Internet

When first introduced in the early 1990s in Iran, the Internet provided an added medium for publishing works of jurisprudence and political pamphlets that were usually blocked in the traditional print media by the conservative clerics. (7) For the most part, the reformist clerics continued to use the conventional means of print publication, but the Internet had a more modern appeal; it allowed them to publish their views to not just a local audience, but regional and global ones as well. Most important, however, the new technology provided a new communicative sphere, a virtual domain that operated beyond the supervision of state authorities.

While the digital space brought to the younger generation the freedom to anonymously interact, exchange ideas, and write about sex and other social taboos, the reformist ulama began to use the new forum to discuss and debate political and theological topics of a complex and polemical nature that were deemed heretical by the conservative clerics. The target audience was not only the religious establishment; it was also the younger domestic and global audiences whose support would be the key to influencing the policy makers who would refuse them a voice in the mass media as it is strictly supervised by the conservative-dominated censorship machinery. The impact of the Internet on Iranian politics resembles the introduction of earlier information technologies, such as the telegraph in the late nineteenth century and the cassette tapes in the 1970s, which also created new individual and social spaces for dissent. (8)

> The reformist ulama's opposition to the ideology of rule by an Islamic jurist...has posed a serious threat to the autocracy's legitimacy.

Blog Locally and Reach Globally

In this light, the use of the Internet by reformist ulama can be defined along two salient dimensions. First, the creation of personalized spaces, both websites and blogs, provided a powerful medium for the clerics, especially the younger, more technologically savvy ones, to reach a wider and younger audience, which in turn increasingly used the Internet to reach out to the world. Second, the new medium helped the ulama access information and communicate with a considerable regional and global reach. This would not have been possible with print publications. The political implications of this online venture were significant, since this new space empowered the reformist ulama to propagate their democratic interpretations of Islam, civil rights and women's status in Islam without the supervision of the state. This process of empowerment has mainly occurred in two distinct phases.

Confrontational Phase: Montazeri

With the introduction of the Internet to the Qom seminaries in the mid-1990s, a number of reformist clerics experimented with the new information technology. In doing so, they mainly followed a group of reformist activists like Akbar Ganji, Mohsen Sazgara and Said Ibrahim Nabavi, who began to recognize the creative potential of the new technology as an alternative outlet for their discontent with the regime. Reformist followers of the new president, including members of Khatami's cabinet like Mohammad Ali Abtahi, opened up new websites and weblogs. (9) Their strategy was the same as Khatami's when he debated online his conservative counterpart, Ali Akbar Nateq-e Nori. (10) The Internet was the best place to directly confront the conservatives without censorship and with accountability to the public.

One of the prominent clerics in this phase of experimentation, which early in Khatami's presidency became increasingly confrontational, was the Grand Ayatollah Morteza Montazeri. Once a senior intellectual and one of the original drafters of the 1978 Constitution, Montazeri was dismissed by Khomeini as his successor in 1989 for, among

other reasons, his criticism of the mistreatment and execution of political prisoners. (11) Although he remained mostly quiet throughout the early 1990s, Montazeri's sudden arrest in November 1997 for criticizing the spiritual authority of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the successor to Ayatollah Khomeini and the current supreme leader of Iran, ignited anti-government riots and sporadic skirmishes between his supporters and the security forces in cities such as Isfahan and, nearby, Najafabad, Montazeri's city of birth.

Inclusive Interpretation of the Iranian Constitution

By advancing the idea that the clerics must defend the rights of people, especially women, and seek to establish a government that is democratic and yet embodies the ideals of Islamic justice, Montazeri recognized an essential fact: the way to establish a just government is to acknowledge that people understand their own interests.

In contrast to the clerical officials in Tehran, Montazeri advocated a more inclusive, pluralistic interpretation of the Iranian constitution that would give the Iranian populace the right to elect all its leaders, including the supreme leader, who is currently appointed by a body of high-ranking clerics, the Assembly of Experts. By advancing the idea that the clerics must defend the rights of people, especially women, and seek to establish a government that is democratic and yet embodies the ideals of Islamic justice, Montazeri recognized an essential fact: the way to establish a just government is to acknowledge that people understand their own interests. Presuming the masses are rational, he anchors his interpretation upon clerics as advisers (with the power to determine what is just or unjust) in quest of the common good rather than absolute power.

Since 1997, Montazeri faced several attacks by the regime, and he fought back. For instance, in 2000, he threatened the conservative establishment with jihad if Ayatollah Khamenei dismissed President Mohammad Khatami and imposed martial law. This was rumored to be a possibility after the assassination attempt against Said Hajjarian, then a reformist

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adviser to Khatami. In 2002, while still under house arrest, Montazeri criticized Khamenei's call for the destruction of Israel and endorsed peaceful coexistence between Palestinians and Israelis. Under Khatami's presidency, Montazeri's seminarians, who in the early 1990s clandestinely read his banned books, began to openly spread his ideas at mosques and public gatherings in Isfahan, Qom and Tehran. Despite the gradual increase of censorship in the second half of Khatami's presidency, newspapers and journals like Farda, Iran Emrouz and Kiyan published Montazeri's opinions on theology and politics.

Montazeri's 600-Page Memoir Published Online

The postings on Montazeri's personal website, which offered detailed information about his biography, religious statements, scholarly texts and discussion on various theological issues, provided a new outlet for the grand ayatollah to express his discontent. For instance, while under house arrest in December 2000, he shocked the conservative establishment when he posted his 600-page memoir. Providing detailed description of some of the most critical moments of the early revolutionary state, including how he tried to prevent the execution of opponents,it was a devastating critique of the Islamic Republic, not only attacking Khamenei and his scholarly credentials, but also rejecting the absolutist ideology of jurist rule, a move considered blasphemous in the eyes of the conservatives.

The state immediately reacted by attempting to filter and limit public access to Montazeri's website. His seminary also faced renewed threats. (12) Recognizing the potential dangers of the new technology, the conservative-dominated judiciary then began to shut

down reformist newspapers such as Neshat, Jameh and Tous and their websites. In November 2001, the judiciary and the powerful Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution implemented further restrictions on the Internet in the same way that they attempted to control satellite television. Internet service providers (ISPs) were forced to remove anti-government and "anti-Islamic" sites from their servers.

These reactive measures in the form of new limitations on Internet use, including the blockage of entire websites, increased in 2002 as the Islamic Republic began to acquire sophisticated filtering programs from China and U.S. companies based in Dubai. The appeal of the Internet seemed to wane in the second part of Khatami's presidency, as reformists faced continued repression from the conservative factions who in the parliamentary elections of February 2004 consolidated power with the help of the conservative-dominated clerical institution, the Guardian Council, which permitted only conservative candidates to run for election.

The increase in censorship by the hardline regime–radical politicians who aimed to resurrect the revolutionary zeal of the early 1980s–was bound to affect the ways in which political dissent could be expressed online.

Indiscernible Phase: The Case of Sistani

The victory of Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential election marked a clear and present danger for the reformist ulama and the future of their online political activism. The increase in censorship by the hardline regime–radical politicians who aimed to resurrect the revolutionary zeal of the early 1980s–was bound to affect the ways in which political dissent could be expressed online. But, while the hardliners held a tight grip on the public sphere through the conservative legal machinery, the 2003 toppling of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime in Iraq by U.S.-led forces heralded a new era of reformist-ulama opposition. With Saddam gone from Iraq, these ulama found a fresh ally in their battle against the conservatives: the Najaf-based Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, whose scholarly credentials surpassed those of the entire clerical establishment in Iran.

The rise of Ayatollah Sistani as the most

recognizable senior Shii cleric signaled a revival of traditional Shiism in Iraq that resonated with the ideas of the reformist clerics in Iran. An avid supporter of popular sovereignty and a follower of the pro-democracy clerics of the Constitutional Revolution (1906-11), Sistani was able to put into practice in Iraq many of the arguments the reformists made against the conservative, pro-Khomeini clerics in Iran. (13) His call for a popularly elected council to draft a constitution in November 2003 and for general elections in 2004, aimed at immediately empowering ordinary Iraqis, served as a powerful challenge to Khomeini's vision of absolutist theocracy.

Sistani's ascendancy expanded his religious network as well as its financial center, based in the Iranian city of Qom. With a growing annual income of more than $500 million a year, largely gained through religious taxes, his network is rapidly becoming an important force in the transnational Shii community, vying with Khamenei's in Tehran.

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Sistani's Aalulbayat Global Information and Media Center

Sistani's Aalulbayat Global Information and Media Center hosts the most technologically advanced computer center in Qom, which since 1996 has provided one of the most significant religious websites in the Shii world: www.al-shia.com. It includes Sistani's personal website, www.Sistani.com, where he offers the faithful his views on issues from

religion to politics and current affairs. The center is also a hub for various websites dedicated to spreading the views of more than 50 high-ranking clerics, mostly reformist ulama who include senior figures like Montazeri until his death and Yosuf Sanei. For the most part, the Internet has increased the size and prestige of Sistani's religious organization in Iran and worldwide.

In matters of religious concern, the reformist clerics were able to challenge Khamenei's authority by publicly announcing their allegiance to Sistani as the most learned Shii scholar and the most widely followed source of spiritual imitation (marja taqlid).

In 2003, when Sistani's authority grew because of his popularity in Iran after the fall of Saddam, the center presented the reformist Iranian clerics with a huge opportunity: the chance to further expand their Internet accessibility and express their views online. But this time, they were able to do so under the guise of Sistani's religious teachings, which implicitly contradicted Khamenei's religious authority and, consequently, his political power. In matters of religious concern, the reformist clerics were able to challenge Khamenei's authority by publicly announcing their allegiance to Sistani as the most learned Shii scholar and the most widely followed source of spiritual imitation (marja taqlid). This signaled a major act of resistance from clerics who had been seeking to decentralize the Shii clerical institution and release it from the tight grip of Tehran since 1979.

A Delicate Rivalry

The reaction of the conservative clerics has been less open. Not only is Sistani a major religious figure; he is also highly popular among the Shiis in the region, especially in Iraq and Lebanon, where Iran has vital interests. (15) Sistani, too, has been careful not to upset the conservative clerics in Iran, since many of his seminaries, as well as his financial center, are based in Qom. But he is independent

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> Since the end of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, women's-rights activists have started a slow but persistent movement for equality.

enough not to appease the Iranian regime by indirectly challenging Khamenei's authority in religious matters, though these confrontations have occurred in subtle ways. Nevertheless, this delicate rivalry between the two religious authorities has provided an opportunity for a camouflaged dissent. This may not have any major consequences in the short term, but down the line it could pose serious challenges to the religious legitimacy of the Islamic Republic.

Yet the confrontational form of clerical resistance continues to be a force in the political landscape of Iran. The October 2006 arrest of Ayatollah Hussain Kazemeini Boroujerdi is a case in point. Since the early 1990s, Boroujerdi's criticism of Khamenei and his increasing appeal among the religious sections of the Iranian population has posed a major threat to the authorities. It was no surprise that his arrest led to a number of public demonstrations, which were harshly put down by the state. An intriguing phenomenon followed Boroujerdi's arrest: his followers recorded their clashes with the police and posted the footage on YouTube. (16) Although the YouTube site is blocked in Iran, Boroujerdi's computer-savvy followers managed to email the recording to the ayatollah's followers abroad so they would be able to post it online. (17) Iranian viewers were able to see the video by using various antifilter programs to access the site. The use of email and mobile phones was crucial for the way Boroujerdi's followers communicated beyond the supervision of the authorities to attract international sympathy for their cause. As the case of Boroujerdi shows, the use of information technology carries the potential for a form of dissent that could unleash a new phase in the conflict between reformist and conservative clerics.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

In the absence of political-party competition,

women's-rights activists used the Internet to express dissent and attract international attention.

Since the end of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, women's-rights activists have started a slow but persistent movement for equality. During the reconstruction era, Iranian women gained a substantial presence in the workforce and demanded parity. (18) Many women's publications, such as Zanan, (19) Zan, and Farzaneh, as well as governmental offices, started working on women's issues. As the reform movement surfaced in the country, many women's-rights activists joined forces with reformists, who could not have won the elections in 1997 without overwhelming support from Iranian women. As the reformists experienced backlash from the hardliners, specifically the judiciary, many reformist publications, including women's publications and those sympathetic with their cause, were shut down. In the absence of political-party competition, women's-rights activists used the Internet to express dissent and attract international attention.

The 2005 elections in Iran showed the uncertainties of politics, (20) but it was also a historic time for women's-rights activists to claim their independence from political factions. With only 60 percent of eligible voters going to the polls–as many boycotted the elections to protest the Guardian Council's eligibility process–the reformists candidates Moin and Karrubi were defeated. Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad earned 21 percent and 19.5 percent of the votes, respectively. In the midst of the second round of elections, the women's-rights activists organized a peaceful protest on 22 Khordad 1384 (June 12, 2005) in front of the University of Tehran.

2005 Women's Rights Demonstration

The demonstration announced an independent women's-rights movement that once again targeted the constitution and the inequalities embedded in the Iranian legal system as obstacles to social justice. The Feminist Tribune, the activists' website, which is no longer online, posted photos of the relatively calm event. The site was later blocked in Iran.

Within days, 1,000 people had signed the public declaration, also posted online, calling upon

the Iranian state to change discriminatory laws with regard to women. More than 130 weblogs posted their call to action, and many women's-rights groups in the United States and Europe endorsed the action.

From the start, the women's-rights demonstrations called on student activists and others to form a coalition. Women's nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from Kurdistan, Azerbaijan (the city of Tabriz), Esfahan and other provinces announced their full-fledged support. Within days, 1,000 people had signed the public declaration, also posted online, calling upon the Iranian state to change discriminatory laws with regard to women. More than 130 weblogs posted their call to action, and many women's-rights groups in the United States and Europe endorsed the action.

Instead of an apathetic boycott, the women's-rights activists were able to show a political alternative: a nonviolent movement to change the current constitution, which allows the supreme leader and the unelected Guardian Council to approve and ultimately appoint the president of the country.

The demonstration in 2005 drew more than 6,000 people, but the state-run news agencies reported only 700. While the opinion polling stayed uneventful, reflecting the boycott by many, the site of the demonstration attracted relative enthusiasm. At the heart of these activists' efforts was a demand for amending the constitution to limit the future president's powers to make fundamental political, economic and social changes. Instead of an apathetic boycott, the women's-rights activists were able to show a political alternative: a nonviolent movement to change the current constitution, which allows the supreme leader and the unelected Guardian Council to approve and ultimately appoint the president of the country.

The Withering of Reform

While Ahmadinejad used the opportunity to win the support of the lower classes with his radical rhetoric, through online campaigns and carefully planned demonstrations, women's-rights activists seized the moment to demand changes in the

constitution that would render any reform effort obsolete.

With only seven candidates successfully vetted by the Guardian Council, conditions were ripe for an independent movement to remind the public of the inherent limitations of the Iranian constitution. After the experience of the reformist government of President Khatami (1997-2005), there was a general feeling of despair among Iranian activists who had previously placed much hope in the "civil society" project. In 2004, Khatami recognized that the reformist camp was withering away. In a tract entitled "A Letter for Tomorrow," (21) he defended his record within the severe limitations placed on him by radical political factions and the constitution. While Ahmadinejad used the opportunity to win the support of the lower classes with his radical rhetoric, through online campaigns and carefully planned demonstrations, women's-rights activists seized the moment to demand changes in the constitution that would render any reform effort obsolete.

Ahmadinejad Rises; Civil Society Suffers

After an unsuccessful reform movement, the country seemed to have reverted back to its early revolutionary period. Ahmadinejad's presidency proved antithetical to social movements. Ahmadinejad was among the volunteers who had joined the ranks of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Council (IRGC) in 1986 to fight in the Iran-Iraq War. A former Sepahi (IRGC), Ahmadinejad is a staunch revolutionary with a mission to defend the Islamic revolution from its enemies inside and outside of the country. These enemies can easily be found, according to the president and his supporters–better known as Osulgarayan (the principalists)–among students and civil-society activists, especially women's-rights activists, who directly challenge Islamic law (sharia). His platform during his fierce campaign for the presidency did not include a stance on gender inequality; unlike other presidential candidates, he made no effort to target women voters specifically. (22)

Shortly after the elections, Ahmadinejad declared his vision for Iranian society and its nascent

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movements. Blending nationalism and religious fervor, he made bold statements about the need to become a self-sufficient Islamic country with nuclear energy. Framing this issue as a nationalistic goal for the Islamic nation of Iran, Ahmadinejad identified internal opposition to his plans as "threats to national security." (23) When women's-rights activists gathered to commemorate the first anniversary of 22 Khordad in Haft-e Tir square in the heart of Tehran, more than 30 were arrested by the police, charged with making threats to national security and interrogated by the Ministry of Information.

Violent Suppression of Non-Violent Protesters

The women's division of the police used violence and coercion to suppress the peaceful demonstration in 2006. Pictures were taken and immediately posted on various weblogs and news sites. Simin Behbehani, the well-known poet, told foreign reporters how she was tasered and beaten along with others who had refrained from physical confrontation with the police. ILNA reported that the head of the judiciary, Alireza Avaayi, had declared that the organizers were legally required to acquire permission from the authorities. The organizers cited their constitutional right (principle 27) to peacefully demonstrate as citizens as long as the demonstration does not oppose Islamic values and no one bears arms. Shirin Ebadi, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate of 2003, filed a legal complaint against the excessive use of force by the policewomen–especially assigned to this case–against unarmed Muslim women who had gathered to peacefully demand equality under the law.

Seven Demands

Although the activists did not get a chance to read their demands, a complete list was posted on blogs and widely distributed on the Internet. (24) In their announcement, titled "100-year-old demands," the activists appealed to the Iranian state to grant security to Iranian women inside their homes, in their professions and in the greater society. The activists stressed that their nonviolent struggles for women's equality since the constitutional revolution (1907) have always been within their "senfi" parameters. "Senf" literally means trade/ guild/class; the equivalent of senf union is trade union. By referring to themselves as a senf, these activists are invoking a historical tradition, ranking themselves as a class of workers whose demands are independent of political factions. There were seven items on their list of demands:

1) an equal right to divorce;
2) the outlawing of polygamy;
3) equal rights after marriage;
4) the right to child custody;
5) an increase in the legal age for criminal punishment of girls from nine to 18;
6) equal legal rights for witnesses and judges irrespective of gender; and
7) equal employment rights.

If these rights were not granted to all Iranian women–which would require amending the constitution–the activists declared they would continue their nonviolent protests.

Many Arrested

More than 70 people were arrested, including reporters, student activists and union activists along with a former member of parliament and critic of Iranian detention practices, Ali Akbar Mussavi Khoini. (25) According to the eyewitnesses, police used batons and tasers to physically control the protesters, who did not respond with force. The security forces confiscated many of the demonstrators' phones in order to halt the distribution of images and news from the scene. But eyewitness accounts and images of police brutality leaked out and were widely distributed on the Internet by bloggers and news websites. The reporters' union issued a letter demanding the release of ten reporters. Jebhe Mosharekat Iran-e Islami (the Participatory Party of Islamic Iran, the main political party of the reformists) issued a statement condemning the violence by

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the police as illegitimate and unlawful. The violence against the women's-rights protesters unified a wide range of activists, including those who were initially opposed to the idea of a demonstration.

The Beginning of the One Million Signature Campaign

Faced with state violence on the one hand and initial opposition by the older generation of women's-rights activists on the other, young activists decided to change their target audience. Instead of focusing solely on the state, as social movements traditionally do in Iran, they decided to broaden their social base by talking to people, gaining their support and recruiting new members. Upon distribution of their pamphlets in the streets on the eve of the June 12, 2006, event, the activists saw firsthand that they have the potential to draw large crowds sympathetic to their cause. This marked the beginning of the One Million Signature Campaign to

change discriminatory laws against women in Iran.

The activists started to gather signatures and listen to women's narratives as told by people around the country. They published an announcement of their goals on the Internet, a notebook on existing legal limitations on women's rights, and a form to sign. In face-to-face interactions, the activists engaged with both men and women regarding the gender inequalities embedded in the constitution. Unlike political parties or past social movements with hierarchical power structures, these activists listened to their fellow citizens to create a grass-roots movement directly challenging the Islamic constitution. Instead of advocating on behalf of women or finding leeway in the legal system for their own advantage, as many women do in Iranian courts, (26) the campaigners sought to shape, and in turn were shaped by, a new understanding of a future society in which women's rights would be fully recognized. A summary of the initial statement of the One Million Signature Campaign reads as follows:

> According to existing laws, a nine-year-old girl can be tried as an adult and, if a court finds her guilty, she can be executed. If a

man and a woman become paralyzed in a car accident, the woman can only receive half of what a man receives as damages. If a man and a woman witness a crime, the woman's testimony is not counted, but the man's is. According to the law, a father can force his 13-year-old daughter into marrying a 70-year-old man. A mother cannot take full custody of her children under the existing laws nor even make decisions on their financial and medical conditions. A mother cannot legally determine her children's residency nor travel outside of the country without her husband's permission. A man can have multiple wives and divorce any or all at any time for whatever reason. (27)

The Spread of the Campaign

Within a year, the campaign spread to 16 provinces throughout the country, and volunteers opened a men's group as well as a branch in California. In June 2007, following a speech by Hashemi Rafsanjani supporting the activists' call for equality in diyeh (damages paid to victims as regulated by sharia) for men and women, Ayatollah Sanei and Hojatoleslam Gharavian also announced their support for the equality of men and women in sharia law. (28) Ayatollah Mussavi Tabrizi condemned the charges that women's-rights activists were a "threat to national security" as "political stigmatization" in order to exclude these activists from the Iranian civil sphere. (29) Other political figures such as Ebrahim Yazdi (from the nationalist-religious faction) and Elahe Koolayi (a member of the sixth parliament) also supported the legitimacy of the women's movement.

Despite support by reformist ulama and members of the parliament, the so-called dowlat-e mehrvarzi–the kind and generous government–of Ahmadinejad has responded with harsh measures. At the time of this writing, the authorities have blocked the site of the One Million Signature Campaign eight times. Many of the activists have been detained on charges of "spreading propaganda against the system" and "acting against national security" while gathering signatures in public spaces. In 2008, two members of the campaign who were directly in charge of the websites, Zanestan.com [no

longer online] and we-4change.info [domain name changed to we-change.org]–Maryam Hosseinkhah and Jelveh Javaheri respectively–were held in Evin prison on the above-mentioned charges. In November 2007, Ronak Safarzadeh and Hana Abdi, active members of the Campaign in Kurdestan province, were detained and held without charge or trial in Sanandaj by local officials from the Ministry of Intelligence. [Updates: Safarzadeh: http://www.rahana.org/prisoners-en/?p=1497 and Abdi: http://www.amnesty.org.au/svaw/comments/20526/]

Arrests Target the Young

Most of the activists arrested in relation to the One Million Signature Campaign are in their twenties, too young to have witnessed the events leading up to the revolution or, in most cases, the revolution itself. For instance, Jelveh Javehri is 24 years old, a graduate student in sociology at Al-Zahra University who lost two of her brothers in the Iran-Iraq War. She is one of the many citizen journalists/bloggers who have directly contributed to broad coverage of the campaign on the Internet. Her arrest prompted Asieh Amini, another activist, to condemn the harsh response of the system as a violation of the commitment of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the World Summit on the Information Society, which obligates Iran to ensure "an open, inclusive information society that benefits all people." (30)

Mothers for Peace

The nonviolent conflict sparked by the One Million Signature Campaign seems to have had a domino effect. The mothers of the young activists now in detention or condemned to receive lashings, along with others concerned about the prospects of war, have gathered to form Mothers for Peace (http://www.motherspeace.blogfa.com/). Another campaign by civil-society activists has also started, in conjunction with a signature campaign to stop stoning in Iran. As of December 16, 2007, this campaign had become an international movement by joining forces with activists from other Islamic countries. (31)

Among the challenges faced by the idea of an

Islamic civil sphere are the sociopolitical critiques emanating from the reformist ulama and women.

THE PROMISE OF THE INTERNET

This paper attempts to explain the public origins and deployment of information technology in Iran and its utilization by two forces in today's Iranian society, directly challenging the political system. Iran has a nascent civil society or, to use Jeffrey Alexander's words, "a civil sphere: a world of values and institutions that generate the capacity for social criticism and democratic integration at the same time." (32) Among the challenges faced by the idea of an Islamic civil sphere are the sociopolitical critiques emanating from the reformist ulama and women. These movements oppose the current political structure in Iran with its unelected supreme leader at the top and an ultra-conservative president. In the absence of viable alternative political parties, these movements create civil power through direct participation or the Internet to broaden the civil sphere. If the political system is not able to incorporate their demands, it will be forced to change in fundamental ways.

The ulama, as well as women's-rights activists, demand the fulfillment of their particular interests (eliminating the velayat-e faqih and discriminatory laws against women, respectively), while simultaneously calling for a radically different idea of Islamic justice.

On the surface, the reformist clerics and women's-rights activists seem to be very far from each other in terms of their ideals and strategies. But a closer look at these movements reveals otherwise. The ulama, as well as women's-rights activists, demand the fulfillment of their particular interests (eliminating the velayat-e faqih and discriminatory laws against women, respectively), while simultaneously calling for a radically different idea of Islamic justice. While the former is highly centralized, as religious movements traditionally have been in Iran, the latter is decentralized and participatory. Both movements, however, use the Internet to spread their ideas, recruit new members and attract international attention. Despite the regime's crackdown and blocking of the activists' sites, these reformers

have shown resilience, and their new communicative strategies suggest ways to broaden the civil sphere in the service of democracy.

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(1) See Jeffrey C. Alexander, The Civil Sphere (Oxford University Press, 2006).

(2) For a study of reform debate led by the ulama, see Said Arjomand, "The Reform Movement and the Debate on Modernity and Tradition in Contemporary Iran," International Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol. 34 (2002), pp. 719-31; Mehran Kamrava, "Iranian Shiism under Debate," Middle East Policy, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Summer 2003), pp. 102-112; Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, "Iran's Democracy Debate," Middle East Policy, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Summer 2004), pp. 94-106; and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Rethinking Gender: Discussions with Ulama in Iran," Critique, Vol. 13 (Fall 1998), pp. 45-60.

(5) The other notable clerics who opposed Khomeini were Muhammad Reza Golpayegani, Mohamamd Rowhani, Reza Sadr and Hassan Qommi.

(6) The most important of these publications was Iman va Azadi (Faith and Freedom, Tehran: Tarh-e No; 1379/2000) by Mohamad Mojtaba Shabestari and Nazariyeh-haye Dowlat dar Feqh-e Shia (Perspectives on Government in Shia Theology, Tehran: Ney, 1377/1998) by Mohsen Kadivar.

(7) For a study of Internet politics in post-revolutionary Iran, see Babak Rahimi, "The Politics of the Internet in Iran," in Mehdi Semati, ed., Media, Culture and Society in Iran: Living with Globalization and the Islamic State (Routledge, 2007), pp. 23-34; Nasrin Alavi, We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs (Soft Skull Press, 2005) and Liora Hendelman-Baavur, "Promises and Perils of Weblogistan: Online Personal Journals and the Islamic Republic of Iran," Middle East Review of International Affairs, Volume 11, No. 2, Article 6/8 (June 2007).

(8) Telegraph was used by the pro-constitutionalists to send political messages and information abroad, and cassette tapes were used to record and disseminate major speeches by revolutionary figures like Ali Shariati or Ayatollah Khomeini throughout the 1970s.

(9) These sites included the weblogs of Khatami's vice president, Masoumeh Ebtekar http:// greenebtekar.persianblog.ir/and his advisor, Mohammad Ali Abtahi http://www.webneveshteha.com/en/ weblog/?id=2146307410.

(10) For Khatami's website, see http://www.khatami.ir/. Nateq-e Nori's former website address is http://nategh.co.ir.

(11) Montazeri's objection to the Islamic Republic began to surface in the early years of the revolution, while he was a major figure in the regime. His critique of the government continued when he called for a more open polity and the institutionalization of political parties, which he believed were central to the original ideals of the Islamic revolution. Montazeri's political fate was finally sealed when Khomeini forced him out of his position on March 28, 1989. Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, the former first speaker of the parliament (Majlis), also drove a wedge between Khomeini and Montazeri. See Bahman Baktiari, Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran: The Institutionalization of Factional Politics (University Press of Florida, 1996), pp. 136-138, 171.

(12) This is according to an article in the statement and opinion section of his website, Pasokh-e Ayatollah Al-Ozma Montazeri be Chand Porsesh.

(13) For Sistani's pro-democracy views, see Juan Cole, The Ayatollahs and Democracy in Contemporary Iraq (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, ISIM papers, 2006); Vali Nasr, The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future (Norton: 2006), especially pp. 172-78 and 189-190; Yitzhak Nakash, Reaching for Power: The Shi'i in the Modern Arab World (Princeton University Press, 2006) and Babak Rahimi, "Ayatollah Sistani and the Democratization of Post-Ba'athist Iraq," United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 187 (June 2007).

(14) Mehdi Khalaji, "The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus No. 59 (September 2006), p. 9.

(15) This was not always the case. Prior to 2003, Khameini refused to recognize Sistani as a leading Shii scholar. See "Iran and Lebanon after Khomeini," by H.E. Chehabi, in Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years, edited by H.E. Chehabi (I.B. Tauris, 2006), p. 299.

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(16) One of the most interesting features of the footage are the images of people using mobile video and camcorders to record the incident. See http://www.you-tube.com/ results?search_query=ayatollah%20boroujerdi&search=Search&sa=X&oi=spell& resnum=0&spell=1.

(17) Interview with a follower of Boroujerdi, November 8, 2007.

(18) For a general history of the Iranian women's movement since the revolution, see Women and the Political Process in Twentieth Century Iran, by Parvin Paidar (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

(19) See "Feminism in an Islamic Republic: 'Years of Hardship, Years of Growth,'" by Afsaneh Najmabadi, in Islam, Gender and Social Change, edited by Yvonne Y. Haddad and John L. Esposito (Oxford University press, 1998) pp. 59-85.

(20) For an up-to-date account of factional politics in Iran, see Mehran Kamrava, "Iranian National-Security Debates: Factionalism and Lost Opportunities," Middle East Policy, Vol. XIV, No.2 (Summer 2007).

(21) Mohammad Khatami, Name-ye baraye Farda (A Letter for Tomorrow, Moassesseh-e Khaneh-e Farhang-e Khatami, 1383/2004).

(22) Nooshin Tarighi, "Men's Race to Gain Women's Votes," Zanan, No. 121, Khordad 1384/ June 2005, p. 2.

(23) Markaz Strategic Sepah (Center for Sepah's Strategy) publicly announced that women's-rights activists, along with other activists, pose a threat to Iran's national security at a time of increasing tension with the United States (see: http://www.irwomen.net/spip.php?article4904).

(24) Shirin Afshar, "Everybody Condemned Violence: A Report of Women's Demonstration on 22 Khordad," with pictures posted on ISNA (www.isna.ir), Advarnews (advarnews.com) and Kosoof (www.kosoof.com) in Zanan, No. 133, Tir 1385/ August 2006, p. 12-17.

(25) His arrest sparked international outrage by human-rights organizations around the world. See: http://action.humanrightsfirst.org/ct/

M722_KnlGPJY/. Akbar Ganji, a human-rights activist, investigative journalist and former prisoner of conscience who was feed after 2,222 days of imprisonment, called for a hunger strike in front of United Nations Headquarters in New York on July 15, 2006, to free Musavi Khoini and others.

(26) Arzoo Osanloo, "Islamico-Civil Rights Talk: Women, Subjectivity and Law in Iranian Family Court," American Ethnologist, Vol. 33, No. 2, (2006) pp. 191-209.

(27) The complete document can be found at: http://www.we-4change.info/ spip.php?article11.

(28) http://www.we-4change.info/spip.php?article662.

(29) http://www.we-4change.info/spip.php?article1310.

(30) See Asieh Amini's blog: http://varesh.blogfa.com/post-587.aspx. For more information about WSIS, see http://www.itu.int/wsis/geneva/newsroom/press_releases/wsisopen.html.

(31) For more information, see http://www.meydaan.com/english/ wwShow.aspx?wwid=548.

(32) Alexander, The Civil Sphere, p. 4.

Babak Rahimi, who earned his BA at UCSD, received a PhD from the European University Institute, Florence, Italy, in October 2004. Rahimi also studied at the University of Nottingham, where he obtained a M.A. in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy, and London School of Economics and Political Science, where he was a Visiting Fellow at the Department of Anthropology, 2000-2001. Rahimi has written numerous articles on culture, religion and politics and regularly writes on contemporary Iraqi and Iranian politics. He has been the recipient of fellowships from the national endowment for the Humanities and Jean Monnet Fellowship at the European University Institute, and was a Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace, Washington DC, where he conducted research on the institutional contribution

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KILLING THE CHURCH BY NETWORKING
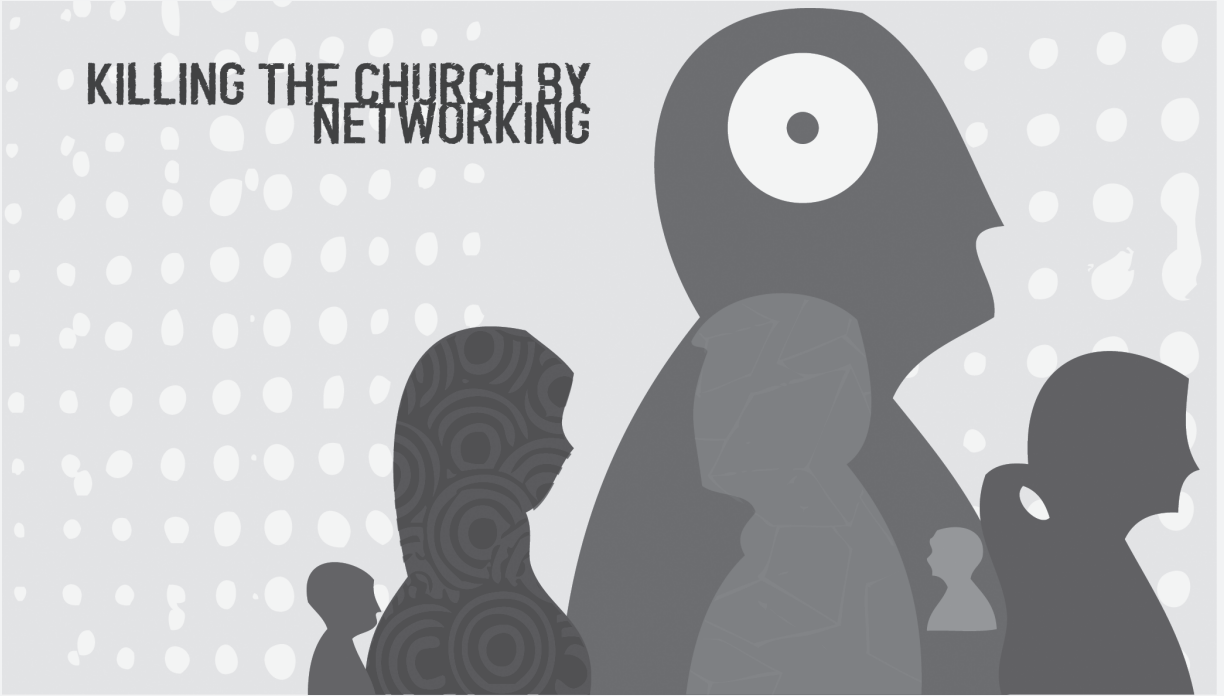
KILLING THE CHURCH BY NETWORKING

by Eric Asp

The Birthday of the Church

Every spring, Christians celebrate the Church's birthday: otherwise known as the day of Pentecost. Typically, birthdays are an occasion for gathering all of one's friends, throwing a party, and celebrating another year of accumulated wisdom, strength, and happiness. However, the church congregation that I happen to lead in Amsterdam's city center (www. amsterdam50.nl) has recently started celebrating this annual "Birthday of the Church" not by meeting together for our regularly-scheduled Sunday worship gathering, nor listening to a sermon, nor singing songs, nor by trying to organize some kind of birthday party… Instead, we've started encouraging our congregation to scatter throughout the city and serve other people. Instead of wishing ourselves "long life and glory" (as the traditional Dutch birthday song would have it), we try to make ourselves small and subservient. The past couple of years, we've decided to do this by volunteering for various service projects

organized by an inter-church initiative called Serve the City (www.stcamsterdam.nl).

To me, this type of birthday observance seems like a fitting thing to do. But honestly, I've had some doubts: Is this really what is best for our church?

Scatter-and-Serve vs. Gather-and-Celebrate

Pastors often talk about growing their churches in the same way that farmers talk about raising livestock. The collective wisdom of most pastors would seem to be that we need to "shepherd the flock," maintain consistency, and fortify our congregations with high-quality music and messages.

However, I often prefer to subvert the standard expectations for ministry, in order to get our people to think critically and principally. I want them to think about the church as a world-wide network, more than a single congregation. I want them to engage with the world around them in a way that helps and affirms others not just serving itself. While many Christians seem to act as though the ultimate purpose for church growth is to grow the church some more, I ask: Wouldn't it be better to stimulate service? Wouldn't it be wise to develop kind and compassionate men and women who can distribute themselves to different churches, businesses, schools, and cities which are in need of leaders?

This, of course, is the motivation behind our scatter-and-serve concept, as opposed to the classic gather-and-celebrate concept. I stand behind it, as a pastor. I believe it's ultimately the right way to live out our calling as followers of Jesus. However, ironically, experience has shown me that the best way to live out our calling as followers of Jesus is often not the best way to grow a church.

What is Best for the Church?

Canceling a weekly worship gathering so that people can go out and "serve the city" has got to be one of the last things that church growth experts would advise. It's almost treated like heresy by some
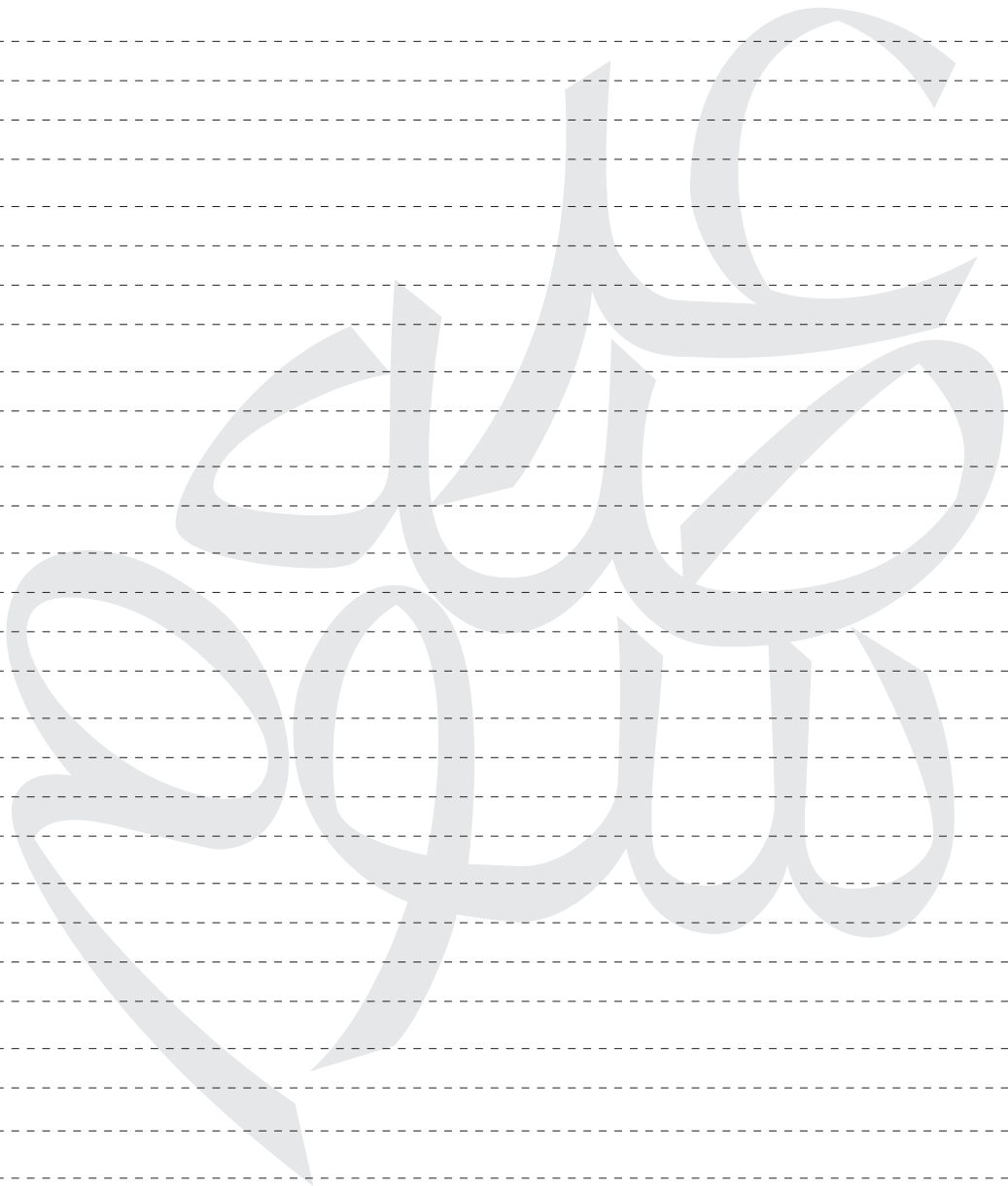
believers. Through the years that our church has emphasized "scatter-and-serve" as a strong counterweight to the traditional "gather-and-celebrate," we've seen personal growth and an expanding sense of our involvement in a world-wide network. But for every person who has been strengthened and empowered through this approach to networking, there is another hungry Christian "sheep" who resents being directed in that way. Consequently, many of the people within our church – and, naturally, many of the people who have left our church through the years – have been frustrated with these ways of doing things. Even so, I believe that networking is one of the best ways to develop the world-wide church, even if it occasionally seems to come at the expense of the local congregation. Of course, I hope that we don't kill our local body of believers in the process; but even if we do, as a Christian pastor, I have a lot of hope for the possibilities of resurrection.

Eric Asp is an American videographer/writer/pastor living in Amsterdam, together with his wife and three children. He studied Communications and Creative Writing at Bowling Green State University but has found daily life and a continuous supply of Moleskine journals to be his best teacher. His casual and critical observations on life, love, and faith can be found online at www.ericasp.com.

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Submit to the Civil Society Zine

The Civil Society Zine is published 4x a year. Each quarter, we focus on a theme. We accept posts that range from 400 words to 4000 words. We are looking for pieces that are provocative, insightful, and filled with ideas. These posts do not need to focus on Iran or the MENA region. In fact, we would love to hear from people with a wide variety of perspectives and experiences.