



# Media and Civil Society in Developing Countries

## *A Case Study of Iran*

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### Abstract

Creating civil societies based on deep rooted cultures in the developing countries is confronted with a series of obstacles and impediments; from non-democratic governments to non-educated people from traditional unchangeable believes to rapidly transformation of cultures and alternating them with new unknown identities.

In this situation, Media is playing an important role for shaping a civilized society based on its valuable cultural and identical characters. The new technologies of Media including satellite and internet mostly are accessible for many of the activists who are struggling to pass the process of civilizing their societies with keeping their historical identities. With this regard, the main purpose of this article is to analyze the role of internet and different Persian weblogs and websites derived by young civil activists, journalists and some NGO's to improve and establish the main elements of civil society based on national and religious identities of Iranian culture by creating a new media wave that we can call it "the Bloggers' Movement". The history of this process, the reason of choosing this way and the challenges and opportunities of its creators will also be discussed in this paper.

**Keywords :** civil society, media, Iran, weblog, journalism

### 1. Introduction

Public communication is an autonomous sphere of activity independent of the states. With popular production of messages, the public viewpoint comes into being which can voice its own opinion in opposition to state-orchestrated voices. Public media has use of channels and technology that are readily available, and can produce and distribute messages freely. In fact, social and moral transformations happen by new media's technologies require that there be a cultural and social space for citizens to voice their opinion publicly.

In this occasion, it can be said that writing weblogs is a reflection of society and its realities. Therefore, there is a reciprocal relationship between society and weblog. It affects society and society affects it. With this regard, weblogs would consider even as an informative source for journalists and reporters. Moreover it is believed that weblogs lead mass media indirectly.

Nowadays, weblog is considered as a part of Iranian society and it is considered as the language of the third generation. There is a need for discourse; a need for discussion. Young generation have this valuable opportunity to express themselves in different social, political and cultural

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dimensions by weblogs.

Weblog in Iran is more than a mean. It is a symbol, a symbol of respecting individuality, pluralism and dynamic thought and action in universities and society. It displays the deep hidden layers of society which can not express obviously. Weblogs show society as a mirror, as bloggers express their feelings and thoughts about current events and social issues. Iranian culture is an oral culture. Historically, Iranians prefer to talk rather than write. Weblogging is a transition from oral culture to write one; a movement towards written culture. This paper tracks major characteristics of Iranian Weblogistan, points to the challenges and opportunities it has posed to the society.

## 2. What is a Weblog?

The term "weblog" (or blog for short) was scarcely familiar prior to 1997. Yet since then, weblogs have become the building blocks of one of the most vibrant virtual communities. A weblog is a website that consists of a series of entries arranged in reverse chronological order, often updated on frequently with new information about particular topics. The information can be written by the site owner, gleaned from other websites or other sources, or contributed by users.

A weblog often has the quality of being a kind of "log of our times" from a particular point-of-view. Generally, weblogs are devoted to one or several subjects or themes, usually of topical interest, and, in general, can be thought of as developing commentaries, individual or collective on their particular themes. A weblog may consist of the recorded ideas of an individual (a sort of diary) or be a complex collaboration open to anyone. (Simmons, June 2005, 2)

As a format and content approach for a website, the weblog seems popular because the viewer knows that something changes every day, there is a personal point-of-view, and, on some sites, there is an opportunity to collaborate or respond with the website and its participants. The ability for readers to leave comments in an interactive format is an important part of many blogs.

After a slow start, blogging rapidly gained in popularity. Blog usage spread during 1999 and the years following, being further popularized by the near-simultaneous arrival of the first hosted blog tools.

In its April 2007 *State of the Live Web* updated quarterly report, the Technorati search engine tracked over 70 million weblogs. It further estimated that approximately 120,000 new weblogs are created every day. (<http://technorati.com/weblog/2007/04/328.html>)

Notwithstanding these high figures, weblogs are also abandoned at the same rate that they are created. Some commentators even contend that the life expectancy of an average weblog equals that of a fruit fly. The ultra-rapid growth of this virtual global village-known by now as the blogosphere, blogtopia, blogomania, blogalization, and Weblogistan-make the process of tracking weblogs, especially those that are active, a highly challenging endeavor. (Stefanac, 2006) The implementation of advanced blogging tools, which

improve both managing and presentation features, have already initiated the emergence of different types of weblogs (photo, video, and life weblogs, for example). In turn, online communication patterns are also being altered. As the blogosphere continues to flourish and evolve, the definition of what exactly constitutes a weblog has also become more complicated. (Hendelman-Baavur, June 2007)

Since 2002, blogs have gained increasing notice and coverage for their role in breaking, shaping, and spinning news stories. The Iraq war saw bloggers taking measured and passionate points of view that go beyond the traditional left-right divide of the political spectrum.

Many bloggers, particularly those engaged in participatory journalism, differentiate themselves from the mainstream media, while others are members of that media working through a different channel. Some institutions see blogging as a means of "getting around the filter" and pushing messages directly to the public.

Though often seen as partisan gossips, bloggers sometimes lead the way in bringing key information to public light, with mainstream media having to follow their lead. More often, however, news blogs tend to react to material already published by the mainstream media. Meanwhile, an increasing number of experts blogged, making blogs a source of in-depth analysis.

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

"There are people online who actively contribute towards the development of the Net. These people understand the value of collective work and the communal aspects of public communications. These are the people who discuss and debate topics in a constructive manner, who e-mail answers to people and provide help to new-comers, who maintain mailing lists, and so on. These are people who discuss the nature and role of this new communications medium. These are the people who as citizens of the Net, I realized were Netizens." (Hauben, 1997)

## 3. The Power of Blogs

The rise of blogs raises some vexing issues for the study of society. Why do bloggers and their blogs have any influence at all? Despite its recent surge in growth, the blogosphere has far less reach than other new media outlets for different information and analysis-talk radio, cable news channels, or other online political websites. In fact, in the industrialized societies, blogs attract a small fraction of attention compared to the mainstream media.

However, blogging can sometimes have unforeseen consequences in sensitive areas in developing societies. Blogs are much harder to control than broadcast or even print media. Despite some constraints, the common consensus is that blogs play an increasingly important role as a forum of public debate, with knock-on consequences for the media, politics, and policy.

The skewed distribution of weblog influence makes it easy for observers to extract information or analysis from blogs-but a key reason they are important is that journalists and opinion leaders are also readers of blogs. Why? Blogs possess the comparative advantage of speedy publication-they have a first-mover advantage in socially constructing frames for understanding current events. As a result, political commentators will rely on blogs as sources of interpretive frames for political developments. Under a specific set of circumstances-when elite blogs concentrate their attention on a breaking story or an underreported story-the agenda-setting power of blogs may create focal points for general interest intermediaries. (Schelling, 1960)

"Public sphere" is defined as public atmosphere where society members interact or communicate with each other via press, e-journals or even face to face relationships. They discuss about their desired subjects or current political social or economic events and finally present a common view about these subjects. With this regard, we may consider weblog as an example of public sphere. In this occasion, ordinary people, not elites, produce and publish a huge amount of information and news in weblogs. It should be added that elites are also members of this new domain, but the majority of the participants are ordinary and middle class people. (Ziaeparvar, 2009)

In fact, the networked structure of the blogosphere allows interesting arguments to make their way to the top of the blogosphere. The mainstream political media-which some bloggers refer to as the "mediosphere" can therefore act as a transmission belt between the blogosphere and politically powerful actors. Blogs therefore affect political debate by affecting the content of media reportage and commentary about politics. Just as the media can provide a collective interpretive frame for politicians, blogs can create a menu of interpretive frames for the media to appropriate. (Farrell & Drezner, September 12, 2007)

Bloggers possess first-mover advantages in formulating opinions. The comparative advantage of blogs in political discourse is their low cost of real-time publication. Immediately following an event of political consequence-a presidential debate, a terrorist attack-bloggers have the ability to post their immediate reactions before other forms of media can respond. Beyond initial reactions, bloggers can also respond to other blog reactions before the mainstream media has time to react. As Mickey Kaus points out:

"The virtue of speed isn't simply, or even primarily, that you can scoop the competition. It's that you can post something and provoke a quick response and counter-response, as well as research by readers. The collective brain works faster, firing with more synapses. In theory, "faster" can mean "fast enough to have real-world consequences" that print journalism or even edited Web journalism can't have." (Kaus, October 28, 2003)

Corporate actors have also noted the blogosphere's collective ability to act as a leading indicator of future news coverage. The real value of searching the net, including blogs, is that you get a live picture of what people are thinking about certain issues. It means that you can predict if there is going to be an issue that's going to grow and become something you need to respond to

before it gets to the mainstream press. (Hargrave, August 9, 2004)

#### 4. Blogging in Iran

When three students-Salman Jariri, Hossein Derakhshan, and Nima Afshar Naderi-published the first three Iranian weblogs in late 2001, they were not aware that this was actually the birth of Weblogistan.

In September 2001, Hossein Derakhshan, a former journalist for a reformist newspaper, published one of the first Persian-language blogs. By November 5, Derakhshan had published instructions on "How to create a blog in Persian" and established his position as the "Father of Iranian Blogging." Within 2 years there were 700,000 Iranian blogs and Iranian Weblogistan was the fastest growing cyber-sphere in the Middle East. Today, Persian is the fourth most widely-used language on weblogs. Estimates for 2006 ranked Iran ninth in the world for the number of weblogs. (Sheykh Esmaili & others, 2006) & (Motlagh, February 17, 2005)

Nowadays, blogs have become the great equalizer in places like Iran, offering average citizens and upstart journalists the capacity to receive and make news in real time. Although exposure to influences outside Iran has played a crucial role in the spread of the internet, the main reason behind the upsurge of public interest is the demographic shift taking place in Iran. The Iranian population has increased tremendously since the end of the Iran-Iraq war, and it is believed that currently more than 70 per cent of Iran's population was born after the 1979 revolution.

As this post-revolution baby boom has come of age, it has led to a significant rise in both the number of universities (especially private ones) that have opened recently and the number of students enrolled in those universities (especially among women). At the same time, the literacy rate has also dramatically increased since 1979 (as it has throughout the Middle East), rising from 59 per cent then to 79.1 per cent in 2008. As a result, universities are producing a large community of educated Iranians in search of new ways to express themselves.

The growing non-academic public is also using the internet as an alternative arena-especially the chat rooms and online entertainment services. By 2001, Tehran alone boasted 1,500 Internet cafes, making Iran one of the leading countries in the Middle East in terms of the number of Internet cafes per major metropolitan area. (Rahimi, 2003)

The effect of these internet technologies is extending beyond the major urban areas as well. As former university students return to their villages from urban universities, they strive to remain connected to this new medium, and in the process, introduce their rural families and friends to the internet's possibilities as well. In doing so, the rural areas have become exposed to the outside world to a degree that previously would have been difficult to conceive.(Ansari, 2000, 65) It is this phenomenon in particular that has made the internet revolution reach far wider and deeper than would otherwise be expected.(Human Rights Watch, 1999)

In this light, Iranian Weblogistan can be defined along two dimensions. According to the first dimension, Weblogistan is comprised of various virtual settlements in cyberspace, which are delineated according to technical boundaries set by international and Persian WSPs. The second dimension involves Iranian personal weblogs written in the form of diaries by netizens or bloggers who share a sense of community and belong to one or more of the following groups. The first group in current Weblogistan includes personal weblogs written in Persian by bloggers who are permanent residents of Iran. The second group consists of personal weblogs published by Iranians residing outside Iran, the bulk of who are from North America and Western Europe. A third group contains personal weblogs published by Iranians in languages other than Persian (mainly English, French, Urdu, and Arabic), in another language in addition to Persian, or in many different languages. A fourth group comprises weblogs published in Persian by Kurdish, Afghani, and Tajik bloggers. A fifth group includes multilingual weblogs by scholars, specialists, analysts, and readers of different ethnic identities who are interested professionally or otherwise in different issues pertaining to Iran and who dedicate their weblogs to the subject. A sixth group consists of non-individual weblogs, such as group blogs, news blogs, and corporate blogs. (Hendelman-Baavur, June 2007)

Weblogistan surfaced in Iran against the backdrop of tangible transformations during Mohammad Khatami's presidency (1997-2005). This period witnessed growing investments in the local telecommunications infrastructure, which was promoted by the government and increased availability of relatively low-cost computers from East Asia. This was followed by a proliferation of internet service providers (ISPs), the rapid expansion of the internet, and improved access technologies, especially in the major urban centers. (Statistical Center of Iran, 2004-2005) Exponentially, growth was indicated by domestic usage and public access points, such as in universities, research centers, libraries, and internet cafes. From 1999 to 2006, local usage of the internet rose from an estimated 250,000 users to 11.2 million. As of this writing, Iran continues to rank as the country with highest percentage of internet users (38.6 per cent) in the entire Middle East (second is Israel with 19 per cent, followed by Saudi Arabia with 13.1 per cent), (Internet World States, March 10, 2007) and the Telecommunication Company of Iran (TCI) has forecasted 25 million internet users in the country by 2009. (Library of Congress, March 2006)

With near 40 per cent of Iran's population (in 2007, estimated at around 68.5 million) between the ages of 15 and 35—the most active age group of net users and bloggers—the country's unique demography has contributed to the high receptiveness of the new cyber-sphere activity. (Iran's Ministry of Information and Communication Technology, 2006)

## 5. Blogger's Movement and Civil Society in Iran

Throughout the world, the World Wide Web and e-mail have consistently proven themselves as powerful means of communication to spread civil society's values and ideas. The case of Iran provides an interesting example of the democratic potential of the internet. It has also demonstrated its impact on the everyday life of the Iranian public. Since the election of

Muhammad Khatami in 1997, the internet has been a powerful supplement to socio-political interaction and communication. (Rahimi, 2003)

Four phases can be considered for Iranian weblogs:

1. The first stage: this media invented by professional and technical people and pursued technical subjects.
2. At the second stage, weblogs entranced to the cultural and social contents and almost all of them were monologue.
3. In this stage, weblogs found communicative roles. They became dialogue and are mostly either an answer to an article or claims or wait for answers and comments.
4. The fourth phase happened mostly in social domain. It is interaction between virtual and real world. It means that Iranian weblogs as a virtual phenomenon have entered real world and we can see their influences on our real world.

During first years of weblog's history in Iran, the internet has been free of control and regulation. Unlike other Middle Eastern states, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Iran has encouraged the expansion of the internet, and the state has actively participated in its development. While in recent years the authorities in Iran have enacted tough policies to control the spread of other new technologies, especially satellite TV, it was not until 2003 that the Iranian government produced any systematic strategy to block internet websites or filter content. (Rahimi, 2003)

The government was also reluctant to control the internet because of its potential utility for the government's own purposes. One of the earliest uses involved an attempt to design e-government programs in order to improve the efficiency of the state bureaucracy. The e-government project continues to expand at present as additional state-run industrial organizations and government agencies are wired for full internet access, allowing employees to surf the web under the pretext that "government business necessitates it."

In an attempt to alleviate political pressure while projecting an aura of "modernization" and engagement with advancing global technology, both reformists and some conservative authorities have hailed the internet as an innovative medium to promote their. This is perhaps the most crucial point in Iran's (at least initial) attitude towards the Internet. The main attraction for the authorities, and in particular religious civic institutions like the clerical establishment in Mashad or Qom, is its potential to serve the Islamic state as a forum for online discourse of revolutionary propaganda. Fulfillment of this goal has largely been undertaken by state sponsored news agencies that aim to promote the interests of the Islamic Republic and the clerical authorities around the globe. (Guardian, February 21, 2002)

In religious missionary terms, the internet has also provided the Islamic state with a new means to promulgate the Shi'a ideology. The internet, according to several clerics, is a "gift to spread the word of the prophet," and its potential benefit for Islam is immeasurable.

However, some members of the religious establishment have expressed their discomfort with the entire phenomenon of

internet use and its devastating effects. In a lecture delivered to deputies of the Political Department of the Islamic Guard Corps on February 15, 2006, the Grand Ayatollah Nasir Makarem-Shirazi stated that satellites and the internet were destructive to the morality and belief tenets of the young generation in Iran and that some of the publications were destructive tools in the hands of the enemy. The specific nature of Ayatollah Makarem-Shirazi's important message did not prevent it from being posted on his personal website.

Over the course of two years, from 2003 to 2005, most of the country's prominent grand ayatollahs accumulated the new digital technology into their routine public activity. By publishing their biographical notes, speeches, written works, official visits, and photo galleries, they established their weblogs and websites. (Hendelman-Baavur, June 2007)

Additional special projects were also launched by other leading clerics. Grand Ayatollah Yousef Saane'i hosted a special chat room during the month of Ramadan. Internet users were encouraged to raise questions for Saane'i regarding human rights, religion, and women's rights during fixed hours of the day. By supplying immediate and direct answers online to such questions relating to permission to use contraceptives, the Iranian senior ayatollahs have been making themselves available and transparent to the public.

In March 2006, the First International Koranic Blogging Festival also was launched in Iran with the intention of increasing the leading and younger generation's study and contemplation of Koranic and religious issues based on their needs and interests. (Iranian Quran News Agency, March 3, 2006)

However, there is historical precedent for producing political and social changes using modern communication technology in various countries, in part from a flow of information originating external to the subject country. During the revolutionary era in 1979, the Islamic Republic was greatly aided by the mass media. The use of audiotapes and short-wave radios were particularly effective at spreading the words of Ayatollah Khomeini, and were a major factor in the revolution's success. The audiotapes both encouraged the propagation of the Shi'a ideology that was the backbone of the revolutionary spirit during that era, and they assisted political activists on the grassroots level, as young Iranians listened, recorded, and disseminated the tapes to their fellow revolutionaries to encourage dissent against the Shah's regime.

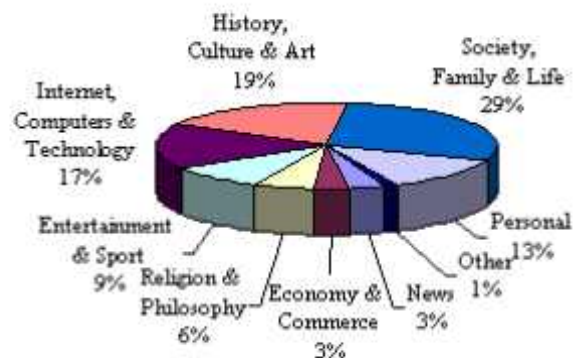
One could say that information technologies have been an indispensable feature of all major political movements in Iran. Likewise, mass media, in particular print media, has historically played a significant role, from the 1905-11 Constitutional Revolution to the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In the absence of political parties, the media has provided the major, and at times the only, forum for political actors to express themselves and actively engage in political life. In fact, for over a century, revolutionary Iran has produced a virtual community of political actors who have expressed themselves through the mass media. The development of the internet, therefore, has simply extended this historical process.

Additionally, many intellectuals and government officials now rely on blogs to employ a higher degree of nuance and expertise in their political commentaries. They include Mohammad Ali Abtahi, the former vice president of Iran turned parliamentarian, who has started his own weblog, neveshteha.com. In fact, the Islamic Republic of Iran's ways of coping with challenges posed by the internet in general and weblogs in particular are especially intriguing, considering that the most famous blogger in the country is the current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

However, the interesting thing in the new wave of media's movement in Iran is that according to different scientific researches, the debates on Iranian weblogs are not completely political. The most common issues are cultural, social and sexual. Iranian Weblogistan has continued to proliferate as weblogs have begun discussing myriad topics, including for example: sports, health and hygiene, lifestyle, caricatures and jokes, and current affairs. Data collected during October 2006 from four of the major Persian weblog hosts (PersianBlog, BlogFa, Mihanblog, and Parsiblog) indicate a subtotal of 178,957 weblogs classified by subject. Traffic rankings by Alexa also reveal that 87 per cent of all users of these specific hosts originate from Iran and the rest are from countries with high rates of Iranian immigrants (the United Arab Emirates, Canada, the United States, Sweden, and Germany). (Alexa Traffic Ranking, April 2007)

Although these figures change constantly, 500-600 new weblogs are added daily to PersianBlog alone. The following diagram indicates the major tendencies of Iranian-based weblog topics as: daily family life (29 per cent), culture (19 per cent), computer technology (17 per cent), and personal experiences (13 per cent).

**Distribution of Iranian Blogs By Subject (2006)**



It comes as no surprise that the sensitive category of "politics" is not included in the list of categories that bloggers define as subjects of their weblogs. It would be wrong to assume that politics is not a major topic in Weblogistan. Despite the risks involved, highly opinionated and frequently well-informed Iranian-based bloggers also comment on domestic and international politics. Debates on political affairs are especially high during times of national crisis, such as the December 2003 earthquake in Bam, the 2006 nuclear row, and local and national elections. (Hendelman-Baavur, June 2007) however, the most important character of this new wave is that for

creating a discourse based on civil society values, the bloggers pay attention to different aspects of this new discourse and do not use only political instruments to improve their ideas. (Kelly & Bruce, April 5, 2008)

By cutting across age, class, ethnic, and geopolitical boundaries, the internet in general and weblog connectivity in particular have been loosening some of the state's fundamental perceptions concerning social order and its sex segregation policies. Free and anonymous expression mediated by computers and practiced in the privacy of one's home (or an isolated computer station) has also enabled the dismantling of social and physical restraints. The unedited and informal nature of weblogs has turned them into a source of empowerment for Iranian youth and especially for Iranian women. It enables them to access critical information (such as health and law), from online communities, gain social support, and experience mixed gender interactions.

However, confronted with these new phenomena, the Islamic Republic began to apply multiple measures, passing new laws and implementing existing ones, and activating comprehensive internet filtering and control-monitoring over Weblogistan, especially since 2003. In February 2004, a proposed legislative article "on punishment of crimes linked to the internet" was first introduced as a supplementary addition to the country's press law. In the spirit of the law, the head of the judiciary, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, announced that "anyone who disseminates information aimed at disturbing the public mind through computer systems would face the consequences."

However, although Iran already imprisons bloggers for challenging the government's discourse, however, the bloggers' movement has continued its improvement in different fields.

## 6. Conclusion

There are some important constraints on the blogosphere influence. The first is the fact that powerful actors in politics and political communications have already moved down the learning curve in response to weblogs. Astute political actors can read blogs as easily as media professionals, and use that information to predict the direction of future news cycles. This also gives them the ability to develop strategies to counter or blunt the influence of blogs before media groundswells develop.

The second constraint is that although there are many weblogs written by Iranians, and over 10 million Internet users in Iran, out of a population of 70 million, though these are significant numbers, they are overshadowed by the fact that the vast majority of Iranians do not have access to the Web. Rather, as with most countries, bloggers represent the views of a very limited demographic group: affluent and otherwise privileged individuals who already have access to independent foreign news sources. As the country's large metropolitan capital, Tehran is the focal point of most news coming out of Iran. The vast majority of journalists, including bloggers, focus on the ambitions and struggles facing Tehran's youths, rather than Iran's people.

However, it is easy to rely on the English media and bloggers to provide us with the tools for understanding and interpreting Iran. But these are limited perspectives of Iranian society. To better relay Iran's dynamic culture, it is fundamental that journalists and bloggers expand their points of view, rather than relying on such a Tehran-centric perspective. (Milaninia, June 22, 2005)

All in all, the case study of Iran raises intriguing questions about the impact of modern computer communications on state and society relations. Seemingly, its rapid advent as an alternative means of communication draws attention to deep-seated social changes occurring on the grassroots level. (Peder Are Nøstvold, 2004)

In the *Transparent Society*, Gianni Vattimo, the Italian philosopher, argued that mass media, including computer information technologies, could play a significant role in the emergence of a new form of political society. He said that it is not that they make society more "transparent, but more complex, even chaotic, and finally that it is in precisely this relative 'chaos' that our hopes for emancipation lie." (Vattimo, 1992)

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

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

The remarkable number of blogs written and maintained by Iranians in recent years could open the path to the development of institutions that defend human rights and promote political and social development in Iran. The opposition to the Shahs regime, which culminated in the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, was partly facilitated by small media and new technology, slowly eroding the official censorship. Now, the children and grandchildren of that revolution are challenging the government's discourse, using small media and new technology in the shape of weblogs on the Internet. History is not without a sense of irony. And it sometimes repeats itself. Maybe it will do so this time, too?

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