Published: January 1, 2000
Last Updated: October 23, 2012

WEBLOGS

WEBLOGS, or ‘blog’s, websites consisting of regularly updated entries or “posts” that normally appear in reverse chronological order, with the newest entries on top. Most blogs are maintained by a single individual, called a “blogger,” but there are also “group blogs,” as well as blogs administered by corporations, political parties, music artists, radio and television networks, and government offices. The first handful of English-language websites of the kind that were later to be called blogs appeared between 1997 and 1999 (Blood, p. 7). Persian-language blogs followed several years later. In 2001, blogger and journalist Hossein Derakhshan wrote a simple tutorial for Persian-speakers to develop their own blogs using existing, free, English-language hosting services (Akhavan, p. 89). Iranian blogs began to proliferate, and within several years, estimates of their numbers were in the tens or even hundreds of thousands (Akhavan, pp. 88-89; Doostdar, p. 661).

The vast majority of Iranian bloggers write in Persian, although other languages – chief among them English – are also used (Akhavan, p. 88). The collectivity of Iranian or Persian-language blogs is sometimes referred to as “Weblogistan” (lit. ‘land of the weblogs’), a term that has become the Persian equivalent of the English “Blogosphere” (Akhavan, p. 84; Doostdar, p. 651). This collectivity spans the globe, with the majority of bloggers living in Iran and many residing in North America and Europe. As a transnational mesh of public media, Persian blogs have allowed for an unprecedented level of interaction and exchange among Iranians all over the world.

Blogs typically present a variety of materials in an informal first-person voice.

Topics range from diary-like musings on everyday activities to commentary on news, entertainment, technology, and sports, as well as essays on spirituality, culture, politics, philosophy, and various other matters of interest to the bloggers. Many blogs act as "filters," with links to selected news, web pages, and increasingly, multimedia content, followed by brief commentary (Blood, p. 9). Among Persian blogs, a significant number are devoted to poetry – both original and quoted from classical and contemporary poets – and a lesser number to short stories and other literary genres (Kelly and Etling, p. 13). Shiʿite devotional themes are also popular among Persian blogs, particularly among a younger segment of the blogging population (ibid). Increasingly, bloggers have been posting multimedia content, including photography, video, music, and first-person voice-recorded files called "podcasts."

A distinct feature of blogs, including those in Persian, is their interconnectedness (Doostdar, pp. 654-57). Through their interconnections, blogs give rise to a vast, scattered, participative communications network with a peer-to-peer architecture distinct from the centralized, "hub-and-spoke" model of mass media like newspapers, radio, and television (Kelly and Etling, p. 45). Connections between blogs emerge in three ways:

First, a blog entry is rarely just a monologue: bloggers frequently write posts in response to other bloggers, or incite them to respond by writing provocative entries of their own (Doostdar, pp. 654-57). Dialogues among blogs are usually bolstered by hyperlinked references that create "virtual" connections in addition to topical ones. These connections lead to broad conversations that ebb and flow in various corners of the blogosphere. Occasionally, they may involve a vast number of bloggers, as during a presidential election or in response to a call for political action. Among devout Shiʿite bloggers, such interconnected conversations may arise during ritual mourning seasons like Moḥarram, when bloggers write and share devotional material and collaborate on building blogs of mourning that they compare to a *ḥosayniya*.

Second, bloggers often link directly to each other on what is called a "blogroll" – a hyperlinked list on each blog that can be used to connect to other blogs by clicking on their names (ibid). Blogrolls indicate circles of affiliation, friendship, and at times political alliance. These circles may be quite informal, as when someone links to every blog he/she finds interesting or that she regularly reads. At other times, a blogroll may signify a tight and exclusive network of allies which the blogger jealously maintains and safeguards.

Third, interconnections emerge among blogs through reciprocal commenting (ibid). Most bloggers allow visitors to record comments on their entries, along with their names and blog addresses. Bloggers – and blog readers who do not necessarily keep their own blogs – sometimes restrict their comments to brief expressions of approval and praise, or alternatively, of criticism or insult. A prevalent form of commenting, sometimes overlapping with more substantial forms, is a simple greeting that indicates that the visitor has read and enjoyed the post, or merely wants the blogger to know that he or she has visited his/her blog. This has led to a practice termed *did o bāzdid* (lit. seeing and re-seeing), among some members of the blogosphere (named after the offline Iranian custom of reciprocal visiting, particularly during Nowruz), where bloggers reciprocally visit each other's blogs and record brief comments and greetings.

The diverse interconnections among blogs have facilitated the emergence of various loose and shifting "publics" that span the globe and are each held together by shared interests. These interconnections have also made it possible for bloggers to engage in online activism. For example, in 2002 bloggers drew up an online petition and campaigned vigorously for the release of Sinā Moṭallebi, who was arrested in Tehran on charges of threatening national security through, among other things, his blog (Akhavan, pp. 180-90). In 2003, women's rights activists campaigned online and offline for the release of murder suspect Afsāna Nowruzi (Akhavan, pp. 190-95). In 2004, the inclusion of the label "Arabian Gulf" in National Geographic maps of the Persian Gulf angered Iranian bloggers who struck back with various forms of online activism (Akhavan, pp. 72-75). In 2005, following an escalation in U.S. threats against Iran, bloggers collaborated in anti-war agitation, drawing up petitions, writing letters to members of Congress in the United States, and forming anti-war group blogs in English. And in 2007, nationalist sentiments again brought bloggers and others together to campaign online against the depiction of Persians in the Hollywood movie "300" (Joneidi). In 2009, bloggers of various political persuasions mobilized to debate the controversial presidential election and its turbulent aftermath. By this time, however, social networking tools such as Facebook, Friendfeed, and Twitter had also risen in prominence and seized much of the ground previously held by blogs.

A common feature of blog activism, as well as political discourse more generally, has been a state of hyper-awareness and self-reflection among the participants; that is, bloggers have used their blogs both to engage in activism and to discuss, reflect upon, and glorify this activism and its importance

(Akhavan, pp. 183-84). At times this intense inward focus on the blogging medium, and the glorification of the imagined community of bloggers that it supports, has led to disappointment. During the 2005 presidential election, for example, numerous bloggers with reformist or dissident political views in Iran and in the diaspora campaigned online for the election of reformist candidate Moṣṭafā Moʿin. When the conservative candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, emerged as the victor, some of the same bloggers began to question the extent to which their community was representative of the Iranian population, and lamented that they had not been able to foresee a defeat of such magnitude.

One broad conversation among Iranian bloggers which has continued in various guises over the years has to do with the impact of blogging on the Persian language and on Iranian "culture." Initially hailed as a vehicle for the propagation of Persian on the internet, blogging began to draw the criticism of some journalists and writers soon after it became widespread enough to warrant intellectual attention. These critics, most of whom were bloggers themselves, were concerned that blogging was weakening the Persian language with its facilitation of "personal publishing," which, unburdened by the oversight of editors and the enforcement of writing standards, would allow anything, including flagrant violations of grammatical and orthographic rules, to be printed online (Doostdar, pp. 651-52). Although initial debates about this topic subsided in early 2004, there have been continuing conversations about related matters, including the use of obscene or sexually-explicit language, gendered norms of speaking and their perceived propriety or impropriety, and the unbridled expression of "amateur" opinion on matters that, in the opinion of some critics, ought to be left to the "experts."

With the rise of internet censorship by the Iranian government, many blogs have also been targeted, and internet service providers (ISPs) have been obliged to block access to the offending sites (Kelly and Etling, p. 9). The filtered blogs consist mainly of political blogs with dissident or reformist content, although other blogs, including some administered by religious conservatives, are also blocked. Studies by the OpenNet Initiative have shown, however, that by far the greater part of weblogs, including a majority of dissident and reformist blogs, are visible inside Iran (ibid, pp. 37-38). Where blocks do exist, various anti-filtering tools are available to Iranian internet users for circumventing them.

The prevalent view of Iranian blogs popularized in the West has celebrated their emancipatory potential as vehicles of self-expression and political

critique in a country where free speech is routinely stifled. In this account, Iranian bloggers are primarily young, educated, and secular, they hold politically dissident or reformist views, openly criticize and challenge the Iranian government, and are at times punished with state persecution and censorship (Alavi, pp. 1-34; Delio; *Wall Street Journal*). Blogging technology is seen as a blessing particularly for Iranian women who are eager to break free from the bonds imposed upon them by tradition, religion, and state (Amir-Ebrahimi, pp. 98-100; Hermida). The common thread that runs through these narratives describes a rebellious but oppressed population making use of a liberatory technology to make its voice heard in the face of a repressive state. This view has come under criticism from several quarters. Critics have argued that the celebratory narratives ignore the social processes and power dynamics that structure interactions among bloggers outside of a binary of repressive state versus subjugated population (Doostdar, p. 653), that they erroneously glorify blogging, in itself, as a subversive activity, and that they ignore the many blogs that fall outside of this categorization, such as those of religious conservatives and government officials (Akhavan, pp. 85-87; Kelly and Etling, p. 6).

The alternative approach to understanding weblogs is to examine them in relation to the multiple histories, ideologies, and sociopolitical contexts, both online and off, that give them shape, and that they shape in turn. The notion of rupture between online and offline contexts, which lies at the heart of the romantic tropes of subversion and transgression, is only one possible relationship, and fails to do justice even to an understanding of explicitly subversive blogs. Gendered norms still operate in Weblogistan, nationalist discourses make it difficult for minority concerns to be raised, and authorities of various kinds do their best to delineate what gets counted as legitimate knowledge and language. As spaces of expression, social interaction, and political activity, blogs are marked as much by exclusion as by inclusion. There are, to be sure, differences in the ways in which power and domination operate among blogs and the ways in which they shape modes of discourse and interaction in other, online and offline, contexts in Iran and the diaspora. Empirical studies of blogs, however, cannot afford to lose sight of the reproduction of older forms of power and inequality, as well as the emergence of new ones.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

N. Akhavan, "The Iranian Internet: Interventions in New Media and Old Politics," Ph.D. diss., University of California Santa Cruz, 2007.

N. Alavi, *We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs*, New York, 2005.

M. Amir-Ebrahimi, "Transgression in Narration: The Lives of Iranian Women in Cyberspace," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 4/3, 2008, pp. 89-118.

R. Blood, "Weblogs: A History and Perspective," in Perseus Publishing and R. Blood, eds., *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs are Changing Our Culture*, Cambridge, 2002.

M. Delio, "Blogs Opening Iranian Society?," *Wired News*, 28 May 2003, available online (accessed 20 July 2009).

A. Doostdar, "'The Vulgar Spirit of Blogging': On Language, Culture, and Power in Persian Weblogestan," *American Anthropologist* 106/4, 2004, pp. 651-62.

A. Hermida, "Web Gives a Voice to Iranian Women," *BBC News*, 17 June 2002, available online (accessed 20 July 2009).

M. Joneidi, "Iranian anger at Hollywood 'assault'," *BBC News*, March 16 2007, available online (accessed 20 July 20, 2009).

J. Kelly and B. Etling, "Mapping Iran's Online Public: Politics and Culture in the Persian Blogosphere," *Berkman Center for Internet and Society*, Harvard University, 2008, available online (accessed 20 July 20, 2009).

Wall Street Journal, "The Blog Shall Make You Free," Editorial, 18 July 2003; login at online.wsj.com/login?URI=%2Farticle%2F0%2C%2CSB105848499831453000%2C00.html%3Fmod%3Dopinion_main_review_and_outlooks (accessed 20 July 20, 2009).