# CYBERDISSENT: THE INTERNET IN REVOLUTIONARY IRAN

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*This paper argues that the internet, as an advancing new means of communication, has played an important role in the ongoing struggle for democracy in Iran. While outlining its history in Iran amidst an ambiguous state response to its rapid development since 1993, the paper also attempts to show how the internet has opened a new virtual space for political dissent. The paper claims that the internet is an innovative method for resistance in that it essentially defies control and supervision of speech by authoritarian rule seeking to undermine resistance.*

The contemporary history of the struggle for democracy is replete with examples of how information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as the internet, have assisted political dissent movements to undermine authoritarian regimes around the globe.(1) In Pakistan, recent measures by the government to curtail access to websites continue to meet tough resistance from Pakistani internet users.(2) Most interestingly, in Zimbabwe the democratic opposition has resisted Robert Mugabe's regime and its monopoly of information sources in rural regions by e-mailing daily news bulletins to other rural sites, where they are printed and distributed by children on bikes. Throughout the world, the world wide web and e-mail have consistently proven themselves as powerful means of communication to oppose autocratic rule.(3) The democratic threat posed to authoritarian regimes by the internet is obvious: cyberspace is a powerful medium of interaction that defies any form of strict supervision. As former U.S. President Bill Clinton has said, the effort of these regimes to control the internet is reminiscent of an attempt to nail Jell-o to a wall.(4)

The case of Iran provides an interesting example of the democratic potential of the internet. The expansion of the internet amidst the ongoing conflict between reformist and conservative factions in the Islamic Republic indicates its growing importance in the politics of Iran. It has also demonstrated its impact on the everyday life of the Iranian public, a phenomenon that could hasten the realization of democratic rule. Since the election of Muhammad Khatami in 1997, and as recently as the protests by Iranian students in June 2003, the internet has been a powerful supplement to political interaction and communication. Its rapid development in a country with a

population of 68 million, of which nearly 32 percent are under the age of 14,(5) remains one of the most important factors aiding those who oppose authoritarian rule. This paper claims that despite measures implemented by the Iranian regime to curtail the internet use, the rapidly growing and changing internet has provided creative ways for political dissidents to challenge state authority.


**INTERNET IN IRAN: A HISTORY**

When Dr. Larijani, director of the Institute for Studies in Theoretical Physics and Mathematics (IPM), sent Iran's first electronic mail message (a greeting to administrators at the University of Vienna) in January 1993, it would have been difficult to conceive that a decade later, internet users in Iran would soar to an estimated 1.2 million. Equally as amazing, to this day the user growth curve remains exponential: 15 million users are expected by 2006, one of the fastest growth rates in the world.(6) However, the fact that Iran became the second country in the Middle East--preceded only by Israel--to gain access to the internet came as no surprise to the clerical authorities.(7) The Islamic revolution of 1979 was meant to put into practice the supposed affinity between scientific technology and faith. The Islamic revolution was, as the 1979 Iranian revolutionaries recognized, an unprecedented event in modern history in that it emphasized the significance of faith in the scientific pursuit of knowledge, and use of the internet fit this self-image.

Internet use in Iran was first promoted by the government to provide an alternative means of scientific and technological advancement during the troubled economic period that followed the Iran-Iraq War. Contrary to expectations at the time, the Islamic Republic originally welcomed the internet by allowing commercial and educational sectors to access it without interference. Whereas in China the technology was largely developed by the state in the form of an intra-governmental communications network, Iran's first experience with the internet occurred within the university system. Likewise, to this day most of Iran's domestic internet connections are still based in academia, in the form of the national academic network (IRANET.IPM). Nevertheless, additional outside links were established by the Iranian Post, Telephone and Telegraph (PTT), which provides service to both commercial agencies and governmental organizations. Despite reductions in the growth of information technology in the early half of the 1990s as a result of tensions between the IPM and the High Council of Information (HCI), a state branch mostly responsible for the expansion of information technology, Iran has so far been successful in developing a dynamic telecommunications (or telecom) industry sector, relatively independent of state control.

In the early 1990s, tensions existed between the bureaucratic agencies, such as the HCI and the Data Communication Company of Iran (DCI)--a branch of the PTT--and the emerging private technology sectors. Rather than disagree over the extent of control over content, the parties primarily differed over how to improve the quality and availability of network access. Until 1997, the state had difficulty providing direct assistance to the commercial sector to develop the internet. As a result, the state information agencies have increasingly become weaker players in the domestic telecom market as they face stern competition from the expanding commercial ISPs (internet service providers). Making their first appearance in 1994, Iranian ISPs created dynamic institutional bases for the development of the internet in Iran.

Vibrant and innovate in outlook, Iran's ISPs are encouraging competitive commercialism and political activism on the Net, unprecedented in the Iranian experience with information technology. The creation of IRANET (the Information and Communication Network of Iran) in 1993 by N.J. Rad, a subsidiary of Pilot Iran, marked the first important step towards introducing the internet to the Iranian public. Operating as a large bulletin board system and offering full internet access, e-mail services, electronic publishing and website design, IRANET has helped numerous organizations go online to conduct business in a relatively flexible market-driven environment. Between the academic sector and the help of ISPs like IRANET, commercial industries in Iran have maintained an active presence on the Net. For instance, internet companies are creating new online jobs that help reduce Iran's high unemployment rate. The rapid growth of the internet in the commercial sphere has contributed to the development of entrepreneurship and the bolstering of the middle class by providing an opportunity to invest in domestic markets. However, with more than 1,000 existing ISPs (and more emerging), a developing technical scientific class of internet experts, and mounting public demand for an unrestrained form of technological communication, the government-owned Telecommunication Company of Iran (TCI) has been facing serious challenges. The problem has not been the absence of state policies to properly promote information technology, but rather the lack of necessary expertise within the government to keep up with the new technology. As the internet continues to expand into the domestic market, poor expertise, lack of industrial bases and a shortage to fund improvements in computer technology on the part of the government-controlled media, has left the state with the challenging task of keeping up with the advances made in the commercial sector.(8)

Part of the difficulty facing the Iranian government is the boom in technological commerce, and the state's failure to take the necessary steps to provide software technologies to contend with the increasing globalization of the market economy-as has been done in other Asian countries like China and India. However, for the most part, the greatest problem for the government has been the curiosity of the Iranian public, where demand for the internet appears to cut across age, class, gender and religious boundaries. The internet's popularity has surpassed the initial expectations of IPM, Iran's main academic service provider, who initially treated the internet merely as a medium to exchange scientific ideas within the inter-university system. The situation in Iran once bore much similarity to the United States in the 1960s and early 1970s, when the U.S. Department of Defense and academic institutions placed computers in the exclusive hands of experts.(9) However, within just a decade, the community of internet users in Iran has enlarged beyond a small number of specialists within academic institutions and spread to the public.(10)

Internet access, particularly in Tehran, has even developed in recent years to a level of sophistication that exceeds that of some European nations. The Guardian reported in February 2002 that ParsOnline, one of the biggest internet service providers in Iran, was offering "Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL) connections at 2 Mbps [megabits per second], four times faster than that available to home users here, and for people out of ADSL catchments area, there are wireless links available, running at 5Mbps, something unheard of in the UK."(11) Moreover, in the words of an Iranian computer store employee, "…there is a sort of fever here in Iran. All the families who can afford it have a computer. All of the children are taking classes, and we sell a lot of educational software."(12) In an economy dominated by the government, the demand for computer technology is an indication of the growing private technology market and a manifestation of deep-seated changes in Iranian society. It especially expresses the widespread belief that the internet and technology in general may help overcome the numerous economic and political problems facing Iranian society.

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 percent of Iran's population was born after the 1979 revolution. While in most countries it has been the youth that has led the internet revolution, no industrialized country has a demographic structure where the youth are so disproportionate to the rest of the population.

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). And as is the case in most universities around the world, all of these students receive internet access from their universities.(13) At the same time, the literacy rate has also dramatically increased since 1979 (as it has throughout the Middle East), rising from 59 percent then to 77.1 percent in 2003. As a result, universities are producing a large community of educated (though mostly unemployed) Iranians in search of new ways to express themselves.(14)

The growing non-academic public is also using the internet as an alternative arena--especially the chat rooms and online entertainment services.(15) 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.(16)

Along with a growing internationally acclaimed film industry and an increase in demand for satellite dishes, the internet has become an important medium for interacting with the rest of the world, and this interaction has helped spur several changes in Iranian society. For instance, the rise of "coffee-nets," voice chats that have become an inexpensive way for the young to converse online, challenge the Islamic government and its oppressive imposition of moral guidelines for the separation of the sexes in everyday public places.(17) Another related phenomenon is the 20,000 active internet sites and weblogs (or blogs)--online journals where cyber-diarists meet to chat about the latest news in their personal lives, politics, or sports and enable young Iranians to express themselves freely and anonymously on various subjects.(18) Probing the freedom provided by the internet, internet users--especially women--are finding in blogs an alternative medium for expression that is denied to them in real public spaces.(19) The famous case of a former prostitute's weblog, detailing the underworld life of Iranian society, demonstrates how Iranians are defying the strict moral code imposed by the Islamic government. Such unabashed online diaries offer a rare glimpse into the frustrated lives of Iranian youth who have grown up under strict Islamic laws.(20) In short, the new generation has built online communities where couples meet to chat, young men dress as they wish and young women go uncovered without being harassed.

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.(21) It is this phenomenon in particular that has made the internet revolution reach far wider and deeper than would otherwise be expected.(22)

**THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC AND THE INTERNET**

For most of its short 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.(23) While in recent years the conservative 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. When the regime did close down more than 450 internet cafes in May 2001, just a month before presidential elections, the decision was made not in order to prevent internet access in general, but to limit use of low-cost "voice over IP" (VOIP) telephone calls abroad because they were undermining TCI's revenues.(24) The same rationale applies to the regime's policy towards ISPs. Though access providers are responsible for preventing access to "immoral" and anti-government sites, for the most part these legal constraints have existed only on paper rather than in practice.(25) Many Iranian ISPs have operated relatively freely, at times even openly defying the state by offering "uncensored" or unfiltered services to the public.(26)

There were several reasons, both practical and ideological, for the absence of internet control under Rafasanjani's regime. The most basic reason is that the Iranian government simply has been unable to overcome the technical challenges involved. By comparison, Iran is far behind China's advanced techno-computer infrastructure, where a sophisticated system of technical control measures has affirmed state authority on the internet. Secondly, the economic benefits, in tandem with the continuing privatization schemes encouraged by the government (especially since the election of Khatami in 1997), have remained a major factor contributing to the state's reluctance to control the internet.

The regime was also reluctant to control the internet because of its potential utility for the regime'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. This appeared to be the hallmark of the government's policy in 1994, as various major governmental agencies (e.g. Iran Air, Budget and Planning Organization of Iran, the Ministry of Energy, National Iranian Oil) developed online presences to improve intra-governmental interaction and to generate efficient public services.(27) 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."(28)

More generally, the internet has impressed the Iranian state in ways that other ICTs have failed to do. 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 innovate medium to promote the Islamic Republic. This is perhaps the most crucial point in Tehran'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 (which are associated with the regime), 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.(29)

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.(30) The

state-sponsored religious centers in the notoriously conservative cities of Mashad and Qom are busy building websites, and providing their interpretation (*tafsir*) of the Quran on their homepages.(31) One example of this activity was carried out in 1997 at the Ayatollah Gulpaybahane Computer Center in Qom, as mullahs transferred over 2,000 Islamic teachings to CD-ROM and eventually to the internet.(32) As analyst Ali Ansari explains, "…internet use has been given a boost in the belief that it is the ideal vehicle for 'exporting the revolution.'" He adds, "far from advocating an insular purity, many clerics began to argue that by embracing the new technology and harnessing it to good use as they saw it, a more confident Islamic Revolution would be better able to spread the word."(33)

Lastly, by making the internet available to the public, the state has found an alternative method to further legitimize its authority in the face of internal strife over the definition of the revolutionary state. The non-censorship policy concerning the internet has remained in effect, mainly, to affirm the original ideology of the Islamic Republic as a supporter of modern technology as a means to promote and secure its authority. During the revolutionary era, 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. As Ali Ghessari notes, 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.(34) 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.

**THE DUAL AUTHORITY STATE AND THE REFORMIST PRESS**

It was not until 1997 that the internet began to emerge as a political threat to the regime, as Muhammad Khatami won over 70 percent of the votes in the race for president. Khatami's supporters (besides the general public, it included non-governmental civic organizations, intellectuals, students, and women) were generally critical of the political validity of *Velayat-e Faqih* (the guardianship of jurisconsult), the political dogma underpinning the Islamic Republic. Khatami's victory brought to life an energetic political movement that emphasized the rule of law and civil society (*Jama'ah Madani*) as prerequisites to a free society.(35) As part of this call for reform, thinkers like Muhsen Kadivar and Abdul Karim Soroush advocated a pluralistic form of sovereignty. Their critique targeted the non-democratic institutions of the Islamic state, in particular the non-elected elites that made up the authoritarian base of the clerical conservative establishment. Meanwhile, the most important reformist activities against conservative rule, the protests during the summer of 1999 by Iranian students, exemplified the growing wave of popular discontent with the authorities. With the majority of the population backing the students and reform-minded intellectuals, the reformist movement (known as the May 23rd movement) created a distinct period in the history of revolutionary Iran, with the potential to undermine the

authoritarian features of the Islamic Republic and replace it with a democratic one. Although the conservative authorities have reacted harshly, the movement has emerged to redefine the foundations of the Republic, and in the process cause a crisis of political legitimacy.

Since the revolution of 1979, Iran has institutionalized two distinct spheres of political authority: on the one hand there is the elected *Majlis* (parliament) and the presidency; on the other, an appointed branch whose main component is the clerical office of *Velayat-e Faqih*, a deputy claiming to represent the Hidden Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam of the Shi'a religion.(36) The institutionalization of a paired system of state authority highlights the complicated coexistence of the elected branch of secular authority (subordinate), and the appointed clerical elite (superior), who claim to represent the ultimate source of authority. Recently, most of the conflict in Iran has largely been due to this complex system of political and religious co-existence that has led to deeper problems as the two spheres of governance continue to redefine their political positions within the state apparatus and, more importantly, on the constitutional level. With the reformists winning in a landslide election in the Majlis in 2000, and then the re-election of Khatami as president in 2001, the crisis of legitimacy continued to intensify, as the dynamic reformist current re-emerged to overcome the obstacles that the conservative, pro-*Velayat-e Faqih* faction have put in the way of reform.

The predominant testimony to this ongoing crisis has been the wave of closures and censorship enacted by the conservative judiciary against the reformist print media since 1997. Coupled with the rapid growth in the publication of magazines and newspapers since 1997, a process that had been slowly progressing since Rafsanjani's term in office.(37) The pressure has been most evident since the 6th parliamentarian election in March 2000, when the conservatives launched a series of repressive measures targeting the reformist-dominated press.(38) The conservatives banned news agencies and imprisoned some of those agencies' leaders. The crackdown on the reformist press generated resentment between the political factions within the state institutions, such as between the parliament and the Assembly of Experts (a branch that monitors and appoints the supreme leader). The conservatives were determined to block the reformist attempts to challenge the establishment via the mass media.(39)

## POLITICAL DISSENT AND THE WEB

But how relevant is the internet to this conflict? The fact that the internet has been free of control for most of its development in Iran has given it a unique role in the current political situation. Similar to the print media, the internet has provided an alternative platform from which the reformist movement can challenge their antagonists--a war of words online, expanding the crisis in ways that were impossible in previous political settings. Therefore, while politics has become more of a limited pursuit in the "real" spaces of everyday life, where decision-making is constrained by the authoritarian religious state and closures of news agencies are rampant, the internet has opened a new domestic arena of contestation, accommodating numerous dissident groups online.

The famous case of Ayatollah Montazeri, a dissident cleric once in line to be Iran's supreme leader, is quite illuminating. Montazeri shocked the conservatives in December 2000 when he put his 600-page memoir on the internet <http://www.montazeri.com> to criticize the ideological foundations of the Islamic state.(40) The 82-year-old grand ayatollah, who came close to being chosen to succeed the Ayatollah Khomeini, expressed his fierce opposition not only to the present

leader, Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i, but also to the very political-theological dogma of *Velayat-e Faqih*, a move considered blasphemous in the eyes of the hardliners. In other cases, journalists, writers and pro-reformist activists have all found space and freedom to express their dissension on the web. Akabar Ganji, a pro-reformist journalist, and Said Ibrahim Nabavi, a prominent reformist who has been jailed twice since the 2000 parliamentary elections, have gone online to battle with the conservative authorities.(41) Ganji, for instance, after being jailed for criticizing Rafsanjani and his possible role in the assassination of dissidents, wrote a bold article from jail, secretly published on the internet. In the article, Ganji criticized the ideology of clerical rule, and demanded the expulsion of the clergy from the state.

An increasing number of reformist writers have chosen the internet as an outlet for their discontent. In the summer of 2002, the reformist website Emrooz.org criticized the conservatives' plan to open a chain of brothels called "houses of chastity." The news became an embarrassment for the pro-Khamene'i faction, as it revealed the corruption and hypocrisy of those in power.(42) Another reformist website, Rooydad, reported a meeting between Qusay Hussein, Saddam Hussein's son, and a senior commander of the Revolutionary Guard in 2002. The report achieved great prominence and caused great consternation among the conservatives when the meeting was later confirmed by the foreign ministry. (Rooydad--with the help of editors who work in Iran's intelligence service--had produced evidence of the meeting.)(43) In 2001, Sazgara, a leading reformist and the manager of the news site alliran.net, put his critical letter to the supreme leader on the popular website: <http://www.gooya.com>.(44) The letter was later sent electronically to the Associated Press to garner world attention.

Still, the most significant step in making the internet a powerful medium of communication for governmental political purposes occurred during the presidential campaign of 1997. For the first time in the political history of Iran, the two candidates, Muhammad Khatami <http://www.khatami.com> and the runner-up Majlis speaker, Nategh-e Nuri <http://nategh.co.ir> went on-line to compete against each other.(45)

The internet has also become a powerful tool for grassroots democracy advocates, which in Iran have become synonymous with the student movement. During the summer of 1999, the internet played an important (though limited) role in the uprising when Iranian students mobilized against the conservatives in chat rooms, organized meetings, interacted and communicated electronically, as the state continued to close down public places of political interaction. During the most recent uprising in June 2003, similar activities were reported, as some students avoided encounters with the plainclothes militia and agents of the conservatives posted in public places by organizing street demonstrations in chat rooms and on weblogs, using the internet as a mode of communication between activists.(46) Though still relatively limited in comparison with face-to-face interaction, electronically savvy student activists continue to circumvent censorship of the print media by using e-mail and websites to express their opposition. For instance, Amir Kabi Technological University's online news, based in Tehran, continues to cover a range of topics, some boldly critical of the government.

## THE STATE STRIKES BACK

In response to the serious challenges posed by the internet, the conservative authorities are considering tougher measures to assert control. In 2000, the judiciary shut down certain reformist newspapers and their websites, such as *Neshat*, *Jameh* and *Tous*. However, since November

2001, the conservatives have moved to restrict internet use much in the same way that they have attempted to control satellite television. Their aim is not only to blot out the "immoral" sites, transmitted from the West, but also political websites critical of the state.

On November 7, 2001, the powerful Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution, a conservative dominated body, declared that ISPs must remove anti-government and "anti-Islamic" sites from their servers, and that all internet service providers should be placed under state control.(47) While satellite TV dishes, still in use by the public since their ban in 1995, were to be confiscated immediately, internet cafes, and ISPs were given six months to hand in their equipment to the state.(48) Though the ruling was never strictly implemented, another ruling followed a year later.(49) In January 2002, the supreme council ordered a new commission to create a list of "illegal" sites.(50) At the same time, the Judiciary chief, Ayatollah Shahroudi, called for the "establishment of a special committee for legal investigation of internet-related crimes and offenses," and proposed the creation of a new legal office to deal especially with internet offenses.(51)

Yet, it was not until the recent U.S.-led war on Iraq that the conservatives engaged in their most serious attack to date. In March 2003, the Iranian authorities began banning dozens of websites because of their political--and allegedly pornographic--content including those of U.S. radio and TV stations broadcasting in Persian.(52) With a total of 100 websites blocked, and 15,000 more expected to be banned, the conservatives appear to be engaging in censorship methods similar to those that are being used in Cuba.(53)

By applying what Taylor Boas and Shanthi Kalathil call reactive measures, countries like Cuba and Iran have attempted to control the internet by filtering net activity, arresting web designers and enacting restrictions over the internet.(54) The regimes monitor what is being produced online and prevent the flow of information by establishing state-run internet sites and limiting private sector access to the internet. In contrast, China uses "proactive" control measures, which work indirectly through devices that promote state authority (e.g. regime-sponsored web programs, e-government services, state-controlled ISPs, and above all, self-censorship to curb the democratic drive of the internet).

The arrest of journalists like Ghasem Sole Sa'di at Tehran airport in February 2003--he was arrested for criticizing Ayatollah Khamene'i in a net commentary--is one example of these reactive measures.(55) In a similar case a week earlier, Sazgara, made famous because of his critical letter to the supreme leader, had been arrested at his home. He was detained for accusing the supreme leader of becoming a dictator. In April 2003, Sina Motallebi, a journalist behind a prominent weblog <http://www.rooznegar.com>, became the first blogger to be put in prison.(56) Although freed three weeks later, Motallebi is still threatened occasionally by the conservative authorities.

In addition to reactive measures, the conservatives are honing their technological expertise to bolster their position ahead of parliamentary elections in 2004. Since Khatami's supporters in the parliament have threatened to resign if constitutional amendments are vetoed by hardliner clerics before the next elections, the internet media could prove to be a powerful alternative arena for the reformists to mobilize opposition. But a crucial question remains: can the internet be an effective medium of communication and a new space for political interaction to bring about democracy in Iran?

## DECENTERED SPACE

With more journalists in prison and more newspapers published (and banned) than any other Islamic Middle Eastern country, the battle for free expression continues in Iran. Unlike other media forms, however, regulating the internet will be an extremely difficult task for the conservative authorities. With some Iranian ISPs based outside of Iran, the clerical regime will be even less successful in its attempts to control cyberspace than it has been with the print media. As the defiance of the ban on satellite dishes has shown, any attempt to stop the proliferation of modern technology is ultimately bound to fail.(57) Even if Iran imitates China's proactive measures to block whole categories of websites, there will always be a way to publish on the internet. In Pakistan, internet users circumvent the government ban by logging into a proxy server.(58) In addition to proxy sites, there is also the issue of internet user anonymity. It will be extremely difficult to arrest dissidents online, as they can easily use nicknames or fake identities on the web.

## CONCLUSION: LIMITATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

Online media is becoming increasingly important in destabilizing authoritarian regimes. In a world where public opinion counts, the internet is proving to be hugely effective as an uncontrollable political site of resistance. What the development of the internet in Iran demonstrates is the way in which diverse oppositional groups, non-governmental organizations and civic associations can participate in a struggle against the state by entering a virtual space of cyber interaction. While the state attempts to circumscribe diverse forms of dissent online, opposition emerges in the most invisible and indirect ways to undermine regulation.

However, there needs to be some careful consideration of the limit of technology to bring about democratic change in the Islamic regime--or any authoritarian regime for that matter. While attempting to argue for an alternative conception of computer-based information technology as the emergence of a new form of digital polity, this paper has left the critical issue of class, and the reproduction of social stratification online, untouched. It has also not delved into the issue of internet accessibility within the larger Iranian society. Given the obvious economic restrictions that limit the use of computer technologies in developing countries, it is important to note that even in Iran's main cities, a majority of Iranians do not have access to the internet (only 3 percent).(59) Still, even with these limitations in mind, the rapid rise of the internet will surely play a crucial role in the advancement of democracy in Iran. Although not a replacement for other media in mustering dissent, the significance of the internet in Iran should be measured against technological developments on a global scale, as well as the ways in which the young Iranian population will utilize such advancements to hasten the realization of democratic rule.

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. Amidst the most recent U.S.-led attempts to bring democracy to two of its neighbors, the internet will most likely continue to play a significant role in the political life of Iran.

In the *Transparent Society,* Gianni Vattimao, 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."(60) The "chaos" that Vattimo heralds is what I regard as the possible emergence of internet politics, a virtual space for cyber dissent. Cyberspace gives dissidents a safer way to expose the corruption and abuses of authoritarian regimes and enables activitsts a retreat from autocratic institutional spaces, in which speech is kept strictly under supervision.

In the title of the paper, I have used the term "revolutionary" instead of "post-revolutionary" Iran; by this I hope to draw attention to the possibility that there is still a revolution underway in Iran, however silent it may be. In the words of an Iranian dissident, "At night, every light that is on in Tehran shows that somebody is sitting behind a computer, driving through information roads; and that is in fact a storehouse of gunpowder that, if ignited, will start a great firework in the capital of the revolutionary Islam."(61)

**NOTES**

1. The author would like to thank Ali Gheissari, Jeanine Fontaine and Svetlozar Andreev for reading portions of this article.

2. As reported by Waqar Mustafa, "Pakistan's Netizens Outsmart Censors," June, 4, 2003. <http://story.news.yahoo.com/news>. The June 2003 decision to ban websites or "objectional" material critical of the government by the Pakistani Internet Exchange (PIE), a secondary branch of the Pakistan Telecommunications Company, which provides internet access to the country, has been met with tough resistance by internet users who fear that the policy can be extended to the print media.

3. See the Economist, April 7-13, 2001. See also Brook Larmer, "Revolutions Without Guns: Nonviolent Resistance in the 'Global Village'," unpublished work-in-progress presentation, United States Institute of Peace, April 27, 1995.

4. Shanthi Kalathil, the Asian Wall Street journal, August 29, 2000, page 1. "Cyber Censor: A Thousand Websites Almost Bloom." <http://www.ceip.org/files/publications/thousand_websites.asp?p=5&from=pubdate>

5. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency World Fact Book. (2000)

6. The Middle East Economic Digest (MEED), quoting statistics prepared by Pyramid Research, suggests that internet users in Iran have rapidly increased from 250,000 in 2000 to 450,000 in 2001, a 30 percent increase every six months that could reach 1.2 million by 2003. Middle East Economic Digest, November 23, 2001. Much of this increase is taking place in the context of what Joseph Braude, an analyst at Pyrmad Researcher, calls an "antiquated copper cable-based telecommunications infrastructure." At present, the Telecommunication Company of Iran (TCI) is renovating it in order to keep up with the growing demand. Joseph Braude, "The Internet is Transforming Iran", Radio Free Europe, July 16, 2001.

7. According to World Bank figures, unemployment in Iran currently stands at 16.3% (esr2003), see http://www.worldbank.org/ir. See also Michael Rubin, "What are Iran's Domestic Priorities?"

*MERIA Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (June 2002). <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2002/issue2/jv6n2a3.html>

8. As the case of the parliamentary ban on satellite dishes in 1995 demonstrates, the Iranian state has the ability, and the will, to quickly prohibit the use of new media technologies, seeing their use as a potential threat to its establishment. But increasing demand for alternative sources of information from the West has proven a strong incentive to discover creative solutions to circumvent the ban. It did not take long for the authorities to discover the flourishing illegal use of satellite dishes, along with fax machines, DVD players and video programs.

9. The central objective for DARPA (The Defense Advanced Research Program Agency) when they introduced computer mediated communication in the late 1960s was mainly to share information by way of electronic mail. However, this mailing process was quickly transformed into mailing lists as each message often contained information shared by more than one user. Usenet, a collection or repository of numerous newsgroups available on the internet, can be traced back to the early 1970s when bulletin boards marked the emergence of the first subscribed mailing list, dialed through regular telephone lines with a computer modem connected to another computer.

10. According to the World Bank Development Indicator, the Internet user rate in Iran has increased from 65,000 in 1998 to 1,000,000 in 2001. See http://www.worldbank.org/ir.

11. Guardian, February 21, 2002. It is very interesting to note that this rapid growth in computer technology has been due in part to the importation of inexpensive computer products from south Asia. It is interesting to note that the use of cheap computer products in Iran is related primarily to the U.S. embargo on Iran. Since its inauguration during the hostage crisis, and extended with the Iran-Libya Act (ILSA) in 1996, the embargo has forced the Iranian private technology sector to acquire satellite and computer equipment, such as software and technical parts, from the pirate market of south Asia, where prices are cheaper.

12. "Nearly every university in the nation is now wired to the global network, as are hundreds of elementary and high schools." International Herald Tribune, August 6, 2002. 13. According to the World Bank Development Indicator. See http://www.worldbank.org/ir.

14. Web, February, 2001 (In Persian). Among these chat rooms is Payvand.com. With its lively forum, the site provides an interesting example of the popularity of online interaction among the younger generation.

15. CNN, June 25, 2001. A few of the more popular internet cafes in Tehran are Asre Hajar, Avand Internet Land, Chinehsepid Internet Caffee, City Net, Farhang Internet Café, Golestan Internet Café, Magnet Café, Shemiran Internet, Tirak Net Café and Ultranet.

16. In fact, much of the success of Iranian ISPs is due to the growing demand for the internet among the younger generation.

17. Payvand News, May 16, 2003 and Yahoo News, June 16, 2003.

18. BBC, June 17, 2002.

19. See <http://www.faheshe.persianblog.com>

20. Mercury News, July 4, 2002. For the Website of the Iranian village, see <http://www.shahkooh.com>.

21. This observation was previously made by Ali M. Ansari in *Iran, Islam and Democracy: the Politics of Managing Change* (London: The Royal Institute Affair, 2000), p. 65.

22. See Human Rights Watch, *The Internet in the Middle East and North Africa: Free Expression and Censorship* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999).

23. Radio Free Press, July 16, 2001. The main objective of this decision was to remedy the loss of international long-distance profits caused by the popular use of VOIP in internet cafes.

24. An internet provider is required by law to ask the user to sign an agreement banning access to "immoral" material on the web.

25. Guardian, February 21, 2002.

26. Amin Mohajer & Said Vahid, "Network in Iran," Brain Computer Systems Group, 1994 (in Persian). In 1994, 10 percent of governmental agencies were provided with internet access, since Khatami's election in 1997, that percentage has increased.

27. Ansari, p. 67.

28. For other examples of state-run news agencies, see <http://www.kayhannews.com> or <http://www.iran.com>. For the official site of Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i, the spiritual leader of the Islamic Republic, in the city of Qom, see <http://www.wilayah.org.com>. 29. Guardian, February 21, 2002.

30. See <http://www.hawzah.net-eng-default.htm> and <http://www.balagh.net.IslamicPropagationOfficeoftheIslamicSeminaryofQom.com>.

31. CNN, May 22, 1997.

32. Ansari, p. 66.

33. Ali Gheissari, *Iranian Intellectuals in the 20$^{th}$ Century* (Austin: University of Texas, 1998), pp. 78-84.

34. The political-theological doctrine of *Velayat-e Faqih* was introduced by Khomeini in his 1971 book, Hukumat-e Islami (Islamic government), where he argued that Islam is self-sufficient and capable of establishing laws for government and administration to shape a just society. With the absence of the Twelfth Imam, a *faqih*, or high cleric, is responsible for governing justly and ruling over an Islamic society according to the sacred laws of the Quran and the Sunna. The doctrine was put into practice after the 1979 referendum in support of an Islamic state.

35. It is worth noting that many reformist intellectuals were ardent participants in the 1979 revolution and even took governmental offices in the Islamic state-at least during the formative years of 1980-88. Soroush, for instance, worked for the state university and strongly advocated the ideals of *Velayat-e Faqih*, as articulated by the late Ayatollah Khomeini. For a recent study of

Soroush's intellectual life, see Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse: University of Syracuse, 1996).

36. See note 31. The term "Shi'a Islam" is made here in reference to the Imami sect of Twelver Shi'ism.

37. For a general overview of the development of print media in Iran under Khatami's presidency, see David Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power* (London & Portland: Frank Cass, 2001), pp. 131-152. On closures of the press, see A.W. Samii, "Sisyphus' Newsstand: The Iranian Press Under Khatami,"

*MERIA Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (September 2001). <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2001/issue3/jv5n3a1.html>

38. It is interesting to point out that since Khatami's first term in power, some of the independent news agencies have gone online, continuing to produce a printed version while publishing it on the web as well. For example, see Hamshari's website: <http://www.hamshari.com>.

39. According to the 1980 constitution, the Assembly of Experts is the only body in the government placed over the supreme leadership, supervising his actions and checking his performances. Traditionally, the conservatives have dominated this branch, and the mounting resentment against the Assembly of Experts highlights the deep factionalism inherent in the political system of the Islamic Republic.

40. Akbar Ganja's "Republican Manifest" online journal published the memoir. According to an unofficial account, five hundred thousand prints were made of Ganji's journal. Payvand News, May 16, 2003.

41. Akbar Ganji, one of the leading journalists and contributors to the reformist's journal of Rah-e Nou, a Tehran weekly, was jailed in April 2000 for accusing the former president Rafsanjani on the internet of the serial murders of writers and intellectuals in 1998. Said Ibrahim Nabavi, a satirist and a writer, was jailed for his daring critique of the conservative establishment. For their personal websites: <http://www.akbarganji.com/> and <http://www.navabi.online.com>.

42. World Press Review, August 20, 2002.

43. Guardian, March 3, 2003.

44. In the letter, Sazgara directly blames the supreme leader for the major political problems in the country. Sazgara argued that Khamene'i's repressive policy against the journalists and intellectuals has produced suppression of freedom and animosity among the Iranian people.

45. It is interesting to note that the result of the elections were announced "live" on the website of the Iranian government, while non governmental news agencies, like Hamshahri, and official press organizations, like Ettela'at, competed for the latest reports.

46. For security purposes, the precise sources of this information will not be revealed in this article. But the growing usefulness of the Net for student activists to organize protests is undeniably an important factor in the struggle for democracy in Iran.

47. As the Middle East Economic Digest reports, all ISPs must operate with a government approved screening system to filter Net content. Middle East Economic Digest, Nov 23, 2001.

48. Control of the internet occurs on several levels. First, the Ministry of Information is responsible for the government's ISP, known as the Data Communication Company of Iran (DCI). Second, the DCI filters, in turn, filter "unIslamic" sites, both inside and outside of Iran. Third, private ISPs, which are expected to be approved by the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, also filter sites and e-mail, though they hardly implement the censorship requested by the government.

49. Also, the parliament has been considering legislation to require internet providers to block access to pornographic sites, a decision that is still awaiting ratification.

50. Europemedia, March 10, 2003.

51. Reuters, November 21, 2002.

52. The closures have led to a number of protests. In March 2003, the head of the national association of ISPs resigned, to protest the recent government crackdowns. Despite measures to control satellite television, the authorities have been unable to suppress the popularity of the U.S.-based Iranian dissident TV stations. As the recent demonstrations show, these stations are on the front line of student protests. The protests were widely covered by Radio Farda, a 24-hour station set up by Washington to attract young Iranians to Western music and popular culture. Meanwhile, Los Angeles television stations helped rally the biggest protests Iran has seen for years.

53. BBC, May 12, 2003.

54. See Taylor Boas and Shanthi Kalathil, "The Internet and State Control in Authoritarian Regimes: China, Cuba and Counter-Revolution," <http://www.ceip/org/files/publications/wp21.asp-html>.

55. Guardian, March 3, 2003.

56. Yahoo News, June 15, 2003.

57. According to unofficial statistics, there are nearly 150,000 illegal secret satellite dishes in Tehran alone. Payvand News, May 16, 2003.

58. There are a number of proxy servers which enable users to visit blocked sites. Proxy servers use a technique in which one host answers address resolution protocol requests intended for another computer.

59. The Mercury News, July 4, 2002 <http://www.siliconvalley.com/mld/siliconvalley/news/3601630.htm>.

60. Giani Vattimo. David Webs (tr), *The Transparency Society* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1992).

61. Payvand News, May 16, 2003.

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