Review:

Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran

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Often being credited with having a huge impact on facilitating the recent wave of protests in Iran, Libya, Tunisia and Egypt, new social media - mainly Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are being celebrated as successful tools of mass mobilization in so called "Twitter revolutions." Despite these claims, Iranian journalist Golnaz Esfandiari renames the Iranian Twitter revolution "the Twitter devolution," criticizing Western media for misreading the role that social media played during the Iranian post-election protests in the summer 2009. Mainstream Western media misconceptions and stereotypes about the way new media challenge the political power in the Middle East draw us closer to Evgeny Morozov's concept of cyber-utopianism, referring to the current excitement about the Internet and its democratizing potential being a cure and remedy for autocratic governments' mistreatments of its citizens.

Expectation of the free flow of information in unlimited digital sphere being a powerful tool of democratization, or - in Morozov's words: "let them tweet their way to freedom"-, stems according to Morozov from selective and incorrect readings of history. Revealing misconceptions and taken-for-granted assumptions about the development of new media in the Islamic Republic of Iran (I.R.I.), Annabelle Sreberny and Mohammad Khiabany deal in *Blogistan* with various paradoxes and contradictions of Iranian policy towards the information and communication technologies (ICTs). Placing

the Iranian blogosphere within the rapidly modernized telecommunication sector and looking at the democratic potentials of the Internet being suppressed by Iranian state policies, *Blogistan* reveals how the contradictions between the development of ICTs and its state's control as well as tension between market interests and revolutionary claims create a contradictory blogosphere in Iran.

Considering that weblogs became the most significant area of Internet growth in I.R.I. (estimated 700 000 blogs, 70 000 active blogs in 2009), the authors demonstrate its potential for empowerment of people as well as its limits in dealing with various issues in such a strictly controlled environment. Through eight chapters, *Blogistan* provides an analysis of the expansion of ICTs in Iran against a background of socio-economic and political development in the I.R.I. and examines the construction of the vibrant and frequently critical public forum in Iran, exposing its comments on various issues omitted by traditional media due to the censorship and government restrictions.

Although in terms of digital divides Iran is lagging behind its richer regional neighbors (Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar), Persian ranks among the leading languages in the world's blogosphere. *Blogistan* thus attempts to shed more light on this fascinating phenomenon, rightly pointing out that the question of repressive tendencies of the state (often mentioned among prevailing causes behind the growth of weblogs in Iran) doesn't explain the Iranian phenomenon in its whole complexity: "If repressive state control alone were a sufficient cause then, for example, Chinese and Arab bloggers, and citizens of many other strong states, could and should proportionally outnumber Iranians." Setting blogging's rapid growth in Iran into the broader context of various technological, socio-economical and political factors, the authors discuss its alternative role in diffusing personal and private comments into a public space constrained by severe restrictions and surveillance by the Iranian regime. What is lacking, however, is a more extensive explanation of the blogging phenomenon in Iran, considering the fact that most of the mentioned factors can be found in other countries as well. A "complex set of reasons for the rapid emergence of a Persian blogosphere" in Chapter 2 is therefore rather incomplete.

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Exploring the issue of why are so many Iranians blogging brings to the fore the examination of what actually constitutes an Iranian blog and how could it be categorized within a frame of its content, language and identity of the writers. Chapter 6 thus describes the relation and tension between Iranians and their compatriots in diaspora, examines the expatriates' weblogs, and points to the return migration and its impact on the virtual public forum in Iran. Special attention is dedicated also to women and their contributions to the Persian blogosphere, focusing on their articulation of many private issues never discussed before so openly in public.

Blogistan has been written mainly before the 2009 presidential election, therefore only the last chapter deals with the post-election protests and its impact on the blogosphere (and vice versa). Although the authors emphasize the level of politicization and civil activism of the Persian blogosphere and agree that new communications technologies serve as effective tools for popular social mobilization, they also argue that the Twitter functioned in the post-election protests of 2009 mainly "as a huge echo chamber of solidarity messages from global voices" that couldn't substitute for neither sufficient political strategy nor civil activism: "It illustrates that claims about the necessary and simple impact of the Internet on prosperity and democracy in developing countries are illusory and naive."

The blogosphere in the Islamic Republic of Iran (I.R.I.) provides a useful framework of analysis about the virtual citizen media trying to evade the control of the state. As Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany have shown, the blogosphere in Iran doesn't lack the potential to influence and strengthen the Iranian civil society. *Blogistan* provides a remarkable contribution to comparative media studies, and it makes an excellent introduction to the problematic of new media research in Iran. Beside the blogosphere itself, it focuses on various other issues from a new, not-traditional perspective. The authors also aspire to open up the new debate about intellectualism in Iran and suggest some inspiring topics to discuss in the fields of gender, culture and traditional media.

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