Book Review

Annabelle Sreberny & Gholam Khiabany:
Blogistan. The Internet and Politics in Iran
London and New York: L.B. Tauris. 2010

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The Iranian presidential elections in June 2009 sparked massive civic protests following their outcome. While the Iranian regime barred international news journalists from covering the demonstrations, first person accounts from Iranians of what was actually happening in the streets of Iran were disseminated through Twitter, Facebook and other social media services, thereby reaching an international audience and mobilising awareness and support. The hype surrounding social media reached new heights with mainstream media framing – rather uncritically – the riots in terms of 'Twitter revolutions', a discourse that was continued with the 2011 'Arab Spring'. Against this background, *Blogistan* provides a timely, nuanced and much needed introduction to new media in the Middle East. Sreberny and Khiabany provide a historical analysis of Iranian media culture after the Islamic revolution in 1979. The book is written before the events of 2009, and portrays some of the growing unrest among Iranians that eventually broke out into the open in the post-election period.

Blogistan begins the important, but daunting task of unravelling the complex set of socioeconomic, cultural, political and religious influences that intersect with the Iranian media system. It focuses primarily on the diffusion and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) at the dawn of recent political protests in the Middle East. Through eight chapters, the book aims to analyse the infrastructural diffusion and development of ICTs in general in Iran, and the practices and meanings that emerge around the uses of blogs in particular. Blogging is regarded as a new vehicle of political expression in a post-revolutionary nation that has quickly adopted various digital communication technologies,

yet remains very ambivalent towards the use of these technologies in regard to freedom of expression and the facilitation of a blossoming civil society.

The book departs from general 'internet and society' analyses by emphasising historicity and local sensitivity as crucial for understanding how the internet may find unique pathways and meanings in specific socio-political contexts. It aims to reconcile the local development of ICTs in Iran with a broader perspective on ICTs and their possible participatory and democratic functions. Underlying the book's analyses is a critical stance towards the popular framing of the internet and other digital media as constituting a radically new participatory paradigm – an argument which often seems to imply that previous media did not enable forms of participation – while acknowledging that digital media do indeed enable a shift in the media system, because they allow for easy and free production and distribution of content by ordinary citizens alongside mainstream media. This 'middle ground' perspective is given substantial fuel throughout the book's historical analyses of how various media and social groups have played important roles in Iranian revolts through the past centuries, which situate the internet in Iran as a continuation of such media-society dynamics.

The first two chapters present the basic framework and initial analyses of the development and state of the art of ICTs and blogs in Iran. Chapter 1 situates the development of an infrastructure for the internet and mobile telephony in the tension between state and market forces. The state, while taking some measures to support modernisation through embracing new ICTs, is hesitant towards providing communicative infrastructure and supportive policy to attract private investments and ICT companies, owing to its wish to remain in control of the content and channels of distribution. Together with the socio-economic conditions (extreme poverty, high unemployment, comparatively expensive ICT equipment etc.), the regime's unsystematic ICT policies have traditionally hampered the adoption of ICTs in Iran, it is argued. However, over the past few years, the ICT sector has become an important motor for the Iranian economy, as epitomised in high growth rates in the spread of ICTs, and an increasing popular interest in internet-based forms of communication, such as blogs.

Chapter 2 expounds on the development of the Iranian blogosphere, or 'blogistan', a term supposedly suggesting a united blogging community or 'civil society' that is outside the state-owned and controlled media system and may voice other issues and viewpoints than those in the interest of the regime. The productiveness of the very notion of 'blogistan' is disputable – the blogosphere is hardly a densely interconnected network emerging around a common denominator. However catchy a book title '*Blogistan*' is, the authors do not seem too invested in the term either, as they do not unfold it as a conceptual or analytical tool anywhere in the book. Chapter 2 aims to begin explaining the growth of the Iranian blogosphere from a few hundred known blogs in 2001 to an estimated 70,000 active blogs in 2009. The analysis is a little lost in figures of blog use, which is notoriously difficult to measure, and uses second-hand sources rather uncritically to support the argument that

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the Iranian blogosphere is large, vibrant and plays a crucial socio-political role, when compared to other Middle Eastern countries. That is, the authors seem to position Iran's vibrant blogosphere as a special case vis-à-vis other countries in the region. This comparative angle is not followed through. The authors attribute the proliferation of blogs in Iran to a more readily available and economically accessible technological infrastructure, a digitally literate youth (about 70 percent of Iranians are under 30 years old), and a profound need of a channel for speaking one's mind in a politically repressive regime. Arguably, these factors also to some degree characterise many other Middle Eastern countries, a criticism the authors raise themselves. In this light, it is rather puzzling that they do not provide any further qualification of what is specific about the Iranian case, but merely point to the importance of context and actors. A comparative analysis would have been relevant here.

The analysis acknowledges that the presence of enabling factors (infrastructure, digital literacy, repression) alone is not enough to create a vibrant commitment to blogging, but it does not offer much substantiation of the authors' claim that today blogging is an important tool for civil society as well as the political establishment in Iran. Indeed, we learn very little about the composition of the blogistan (who blogs, who reads, what are the most common topics and opinions voiced etc.). Thereby, the authors seem to fall prey to the same criticism that they initially object to: namely that the increased access to blogs and the presence of a large blogosphere leads to blogging becoming an important tool for political participation and struggle.

The six remaining chapters, which present thematically focused analyses of censorship, gender and sexuality, intellectualism, diasporic blogging, citizen journalism, and the riots in 2009, do address some of these points, and provide substantiation of the three enabling factors contributing to the development of the Iranian blogosphere. They do so most compellingly by arguing and providing illustrative examples that popular cultural and mundane personal issues, as those treated by many contemporary (Iranian) blogs, may be seen as sites for political contestation and struggle over participation. Moreover, chapter 3 in particular offers a very insightful close analysis of the legal framework of the Iranian media system, and the government's means of filtering and policing the Iranian internet, for instance, by restricting the internet speed to prevent downloading and distribution of large files, including international cultural productions (films, games etc.). This censorship and attempt at state control of the blogosphere ignites resistance and various countermeasures online: hacking of government-imposed filters, open criticism of the regime and its censorship practices, and so forth.

Interesting and enlightening as the book's analyses are, it is a significant weakness that the book does not treat its empirical data systematically. The analytical points about the role of blogs in Iranian society are supported by examples taken from the Iranian internet, but the sample and contexts from which examples are drawn remain hidden and unreflected, leaving an impression of anecdotal evidence rather than methodological rigour. Therefore, one is not entirely convinced of the importance of blogs in contemporary civic

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culture and political struggle in Iran. Such an argument needs support from an empirical study that systematically maps the terrain of Iranian blogs, their participants and networks, the topics debated, and their relationship with mainstream politics.

Perhaps the authors' choice of not conducting such an empirical study has to do with an unresolved tension in the book's dual interests in ICTs more broadly, and blogging specifically. If the primary goal is to tie developments in the media system and civic culture to economic, religious and socio-political processes in Iran, the book achieves its analytic purpose very well. However, in regard to understanding the significance of blogging, the book's analyses have certain limitations. Whereas the authors proclaim exploring the role of blogging as the main goal of the book, they do not structure the book tightly and systematically around the study of uses of blogs, for instance, by delimiting blogs from other internet-based sites of contention (e.g., fanzines, Facebook, online newspapers and portals). Instead, they let blogging (and other internet-based communications) slip in and out of the thematic analyses alongside other socio-political activities in Iran. However, despite its (mainly methodological) weaknesses, *Blogistan* does present important insights on contemporary Iranian blogging, by situating blogging in a broad, up-to-date historical analysis of Iranian media culture and its relationship with civil society.

Having been mostly written before the 2009 Iranian elections and massive protests, the book presents an interesting prophecy of ICTs as a political battlefield. *Blogistan* provides a useful historical background for the discussion and contextualisation of the role played by social media in the current processes of social and political change in the Middle East.

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