

Elizabeth M. Bucar and Roja Fazaeli

FREE SPEECH IN WEBLOGISTAN? THE OFFLINE CONSEQUENCES OF ONLINE COMMUNICATION

The irruption of Persian-language blogging since 2001, known to its participants as Weblogistan, has been accompanied by enthusiastic claims that weblogs are promoting previously nonexistent forms of expression, thereby rupturing traditional Iranian social, cultural, religious, and political norms.¹ The political scientist Fereshteh Nouraei-Simone juxtaposes Weblogistan against the conditions of theocratic rule as “a public social space that allows free expression of self outside the confines of the politically manipulated physical space.”² In a 2005 book, which includes translated weblog postings, Nasrin Alavi takes this line of interpretation even further, asserting that by making “it possible for young Iranians to express themselves freely and anonymously,”³ Weblogistan “is nothing less than a revolution within the Revolution.”⁴

Despite initial assumptions that blogging occurs in an *alter* space, free of the political constraints on other forms of expression, in the last few years Iranian bloggers have faced increased scrutiny and pressure as a result of their postings.⁵ In order to understand what the political offline consequences of online communication in Weblogistan can tell us about the relationship among cyberspace, politics, and Islam in Iran, this article is organized into three sections. The first section contrasts the birth of Weblogistan with regulation of print media, to explain in part why it was initially celebrated as a new medium of free speech. The second section describes the context for the arrest of bloggers in 2004 through a summary of legal, religious, and cultural pressures exerted on Weblogistan by Iranian authorities. The third section focuses on three bloggers who were arrested and interrogated for their postings in Weblogistan. In this section we draw from archived blog entries (when available) that preceded these arrests and interviews with the bloggers.⁶ Revising McLuhan’s “the medium is the message,”⁷ we show how local conditions affect medium and conclude by arguing for a holistic understanding of Weblogistan as (1) an emergent medium of communication (2) situated within a particular political context.

THE BIRTH OF WEBLOGISTAN

Weblogs are online postings commonly displayed in reverse chronological order. They can take the form of diary-like entries or more journalistic commentaries on political

Elizabeth M. Bucar is Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, N.C. 27402; e-mail: embucar@uncg.edu. Roja Fazaeli is a PhD candidate and Government of Ireland Scholar in Humanities and Social Sciences, National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland; e-mail: r.fazaeli1@nuigalway.ie

and social events. In contrast to print media, weblogs are unedited, often containing grammatical errors. Written in a tone of familiarity, they can be autobiographical in an intensely personal way. Hyperlinks provide easily maneuverable paths to related postings online, expanding the content of a blog beyond the author's words. Readers can also leave comments on many blogs, contributing to an online dialogue. Archived postings are also accessible through links; this provides access to the progression of a blogger's interests, beliefs, and activities and allows content to be somewhat controlled by readers, who may read postings in whatever order they choose.⁸

Hossein Derakhshan, also known by his online handle, Hoder, started one of the first weblogs in Persian (<http://i.hoder.com/weblog>) in 2001 after reading 9/11 weblog commentaries from his home in Canada.⁹ At the request of a reader, in November of that year he posted a do-it-yourself guide for the construction of weblogs in Persian script. In less than two months, the number of Persian weblogs exceeded 100; in 2004 it climbed above 64,000, making Persian the fourth most popular blog language online. Some estimates put the current number of active Persian blogs at more than 100,000.¹⁰ Many religious and political leaders currently maintain a blog, including the current supreme leader, Ayatollah Khaminayi,¹¹ and the current Iranian president, Mahmud Ahmadinijad,¹² among others.¹³

Journalists in the West have given much attention to Weblogistan in part because it appears at first glance to be circumventing governmental regulation of print media in Iran. Print media has been closely monitored since the revolution, with some subjects explicitly prohibited by the Supreme National Security Council on a weekly basis. For example, in 2004, when the wave of blogger arrests occurred that were the impetus for this article, the council made the trial for the murder of photojournalist Zahra Kazimi off-limits. In some cases, printing the statements of official Iranian government spokespersons about this case was allowed but only if unaccompanied by commentary. Other taboo issues are less specifically stated but are nevertheless some of the "red lines" journalists must not cross in their writings.

Iranian law generally outlines acceptable media conduct, but interpretation is left up to journalists and their editors. Take the 1986 press law, which states that the mission of the press is to "enlighten public opinion" on different subjects, including social, political, cultural, and religious matters¹⁴; to counter disunity in the community¹⁵; and to promote Islam.¹⁶ Although explicit censorship is not allowed, according to the law,¹⁷ items that "violate Islamic principles and codes and public rights"¹⁸ are not permitted. Also prohibited are discussing atheism and luxury¹⁹; arguing against Islamic morals²⁰; endangering the "security, dignity and interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran"²¹; insulting Islam, Ayatollah Ruhullah Khumayni, or other senior clerics²²; or committing "libel against officials, institutions, organizations and individuals in the country," including the president—"even by means of pictures or caricatures."²³ Violations are punished according to the Iranian Penal Code.²⁴ Particularly vulnerable are authors and their managing editors, who can be personally fined and sentenced to prison time.²⁵ The increasing number of arrests of journalists in Iran in the past few years has led Reporters Without Borders to call this country "the biggest prison for journalists in the Middle East."²⁶

THE SPIDER'S WEB

In the past five years, there have been more than seventy media articles on Weblogistan in the popular press outside of Iran, many of which present unsupported claims that blogs, as new forums for free expression, are having revolutionary effects in Iran.²⁷ In reality Weblogistan has produced more local, offline consequences than initial analysis predicted.

These consequences climaxed with the arrest of bloggers in 2003–04 (to be discussed in the third section), but they can be seen as part of coordinated legal, religious, and cultural constraints Iranian authorities have attempted to put on Weblogistan. Although weblogs are not explicitly referenced in the press law, provisions in the constitution and penal code that limit speech in the name of public morality are currently applied to blogs. In addition, a special cybercrime bill was drafted during the fall of 2004. According to Iran's chief judiciary officer, Ayatollah Mahmud Hashimi-Shahrudi, who has called the Internet a "Trojan horse carrying enemy soldiers in its belly,"²⁸ this legislation was created to provide punishments for cybercriminals, described as anyone spreading propaganda "against the regime, acting against national security, disturbing the public mind and insulting religious sanctities through computer systems of telecommunications."²⁹

Among religious leaders, Ayatollah Makarim Shirazi³⁰ in particular has attempted to frame blogging as a religious issue. He wrote in the conservative daily newspaper *Kayhan* that websites should be blocked if they "insult sacred concepts of Islam, the Prophet and Imams," or "publish harmful and deviated beliefs to promote atheism or promote sinister books."³¹

A cultural campaign against Weblogistan is also being mounted that attempts to connect blogging to a perceived cultural assault from the West. Coinciding with the arrests of bloggers in September 2004, a sharply worded editorial by Hussayn Shariat Madari published in *Kayhan* labels bloggers as part of a nefarious network dubbed "the spider's web" (*khaniy-i ankabut*).³² Because this 2004 article has not previously appeared in translation, a lengthy excerpt follows:

Today's editorial . . . is a compilation of news pieces, without the usual analysis or interpretation offered in an editorial. It provides evidence of a network which is active in the political, cultural, and social arenas of the country . . . This network has an "American identity" and an "Iranian birth certificate." Its center of control and management is in the United States, and points in Europe act as a mediator between the headquarters and the members of the network inside Iran . . .

The most damaging activities of this network are carried out by Internet sites and newspapers that are linked to each other . . . The first members of the network were young professionals in search of social status and notoriety . . . With the help of the before-mentioned foreign bases, the members are sent abroad, where they write in the most horrifying tones against the regime, high government officials, Islamic and revolutionary values, and religiosity . . . Despite the fact that the companies which provide servers for the websites and weblogs of the spider's web are Iranian, they are able to avoid being filtered. How is this possible?! Because the server is not part of the country's official telecommunications companies . . .

Madari argues here that this network disregards the present laws in the country.³³ This editorial also cast Internet journalism and blogging as an assault on Iranian cultural values.

Critics like Madari link Weblogistan to an established Iranian anti-West rhetoric by labeling it as a new form of “Westoxication” (*gharbzadegi*). In an interview with the authors, Arash Sigarchi, one of the arrested bloggers discussed in the third section, argued that the editorial attempted “to make the public fear the phenomenon of weblogging”³⁴ and to prevent a public scandal over the arrests of bloggers by characterizing bloggers as dangerous spies who are under the control of the West. The editorial also lists members of the spider’s web, including technicians, bloggers, and journalists, many of whom were targeted by the 2004 arrests.³⁵ Another of the arrested bloggers we interviewed, Omid Memarian, argued that this editorial served as a script for his interrogation:

Everything they asked us about was in that editorial. Everything. I mean it was really very close to the interrogators’ script. I had read it before I was arrested because my name was in it and a number of my friends had told me about it. It was strange to read. It seemed so clearly a political game. But I miscalculated the game. I thought they wouldn’t arrest me; I thought the game was over. But it had just begun.³⁶

Although attention to bloggers was new, the tactics used against them were not. In addition, Shariat Madari was no newcomer to the game. A decade before, in collaboration with Sayid Imami, an infamous member of the Idariy-i Itilaat (Office of Intelligence), he produced for television broadcast a series of confessions of political activists and public intellectuals. These are understood by many as an attempt to discredit reformers and modern thinkers (*nuandishan*). Taken together, the legal, religious, and cultural attacks on bloggers follow a general pattern of tactics used by Iranian authorities to silence those who have criticized the regime: the critic is accused of immorality, cooperation with the West, or breaking domestic law, which discredits her or his critique without creating a political martyr.

THREE CASUALTIES OF “FREE SPEECH”

Sina Motallebi: First Signs of Danger

The Islamic Republic of Iran arrested its first blogger in April 2003, when it imprisoned Sina Motallebi, a Tehran-based journalist and blogger. Motallebi began blogging in 2001. The first postings on his weblog, Webgard (Websurfer, at www.rooznegar.com), were about the Internet and other forms of information technology, but he shifted to writing “about pop culture and international issues.”³⁷ Included in these later postings were criticisms of the Iranian government’s treatment of political prisoners.

According to Motallebi, he was arrested in 2003 by the Operation Office of the Judiciary (Niruy-i Intizami)³⁸ and eventually charged for “the content of his weblog as well as interviews with foreign press and his other writings.”³⁹ He spent twenty-two days in solitary confinement and was under, in his own words, “very, very severe psychological torture.”⁴⁰ He was eventually released on bail of 300 million rials (about U.S. \$35,000 at the time) and left Iran, obtaining political asylum in The Netherlands. He no longer maintains a blog.

The exact reason for his arrest is difficult to determine for two reasons. First, the archives of his postings have since been taken offline by his family to protect Motallebi from further governmental scrutiny. Second, at the time of the arrest, the Iranian police

did not release details of the specific crimes of which Motallebi was accused nor how he would be prosecuted. This makes it difficult to gauge if this was an isolated event or a warning to Weblogistan that Iranian authorities were monitoring blog content for “political” postings.

Motallebi was still in exile during the arrests of bloggers in the fall of 2004, but his earlier arrest was connected. This connection was very personal: his father, Sayid Motallebi, was arrested on 8 September 2004.⁴¹ It was not the content of Motallebi’s postings that caused his father’s arrest because by this time he was no longer maintaining a weblog. However, just before his father’s arrest he made public statements in Europe that were critical of Iranian blogging regulations and gave details of his prior interrogations.

In addition, Motallebi’s account of his own 2003 arrest helps us to understand how weblogs warranted intense political scrutiny in Iran by the fall of 2004:

One day they were taking me from prison blindfolded to an office, and I was there for some time. I met an officer who was reading a newspaper with a story about my case. He asked me, “What is a blogger? What does that mean?” I understood that my case introduced weblogging to many people who didn’t know anything about [it]. The good side [of this] is the audience of mainstream newspapers and media for the first time became familiar with this term and phenomenon. And the bad side [of this] is that the interrogators, the police officers and judges, [became] familiar with them too . . . I think with my case they were more focused on the weblog. In the first interrogation one year ago, they didn’t mention my weblog: they mentioned my website. They didn’t know about weblogs at that time. My interrogators didn’t know anything about weblogs.⁴²

In this excerpt we see that in 2003 weblogs were just beginning to be understood as a site of public discourse and as an alternative to the Internet (which is filtered) and print media (which is regulated) in Iran. Motallebi claims that it was his case that put blogs on the Iranian authorities’ radar as a potential place for political dissent.

Although Motallebi at times expresses optimistic sentiments about blogging as a unique forum of expression,⁴³ we find within his reflection on his arrest the idea that blogging involves offline dangers. Take the comments made to Motallebi by his interrogators that hint at a dark future for webloggers:

One time I was interrogated while blindfolded. Sayid Murtazavi, a judge who shut down many reformist newspapers and now is the prosecutor of Tehran, was in the room, and I easily recognized him from his voice. Other interrogators called him “Grand (or Great) *Hajji*.” He questioned me about some of my posts on my weblog and then said, “Now we make you an example for other webloggers and will show them that weblogging is not a free [means of expression] without any cost. We will show that they must pay the expensive costs of their writings in this way.”⁴⁴

In this interaction we see Sayid Murtazavi, a major player in the regulation of print media, foretelling that weblogging will have severe consequences. The involvement of such a high-ranking official suggests a more coordinated expansion in the types of public expression to be regulated in Iran.

The genre of weblogs, moreover, shifts what counts as “individual expression.” Motallebi was explicitly told his accountability extended to any comments written by others on his blog: “There were some radical comments on some of my entries, and when I was arrested the interrogators said that I am responsible not only for what I wrote but also for what visitors wrote in my weblog.”⁴⁵ This extends self-expression beyond expression

merely performed by an individual to include responses invoked by that expression. In addition, some of the most moving portions of the 2004 interview with Motallebi are in reference to how the regulation of blogging had intense effects on his personal identity:

I'm a writer. I've been a writer since I was eighteen years old. They prevented me from writing, even in my personal weblog, and even in newspapers in Iran. I couldn't write because they threatened to punish me further if I continued to write. I was afraid that if I started my writing after jail, they would force me to write what they wanted.⁴⁶

In Motallebi's words we hear that, in contrast to being a unique space for free expression, his weblog became a site where even his most personal thoughts could be controlled. In this way blogging actually increased the scope of monitoring and regulating expression in Iran.

Omid Memarian: The Collapsing of Siyasi and Shari'a

Omid Memarian is an Iranian journalist currently living in Berkeley, California, where he remains active in what he calls "Iranian civil society" through communication-skills training for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) based in Iran.⁴⁷ Memarian began blogging in 2003,⁴⁸ posting entries that dealt "with the situation of democracy and civil society and especially social issues in Iran and the Middle East today . . . and talk about some daily events . . . and some personal experiences."⁴⁹ On 10 October 2004, when Memarian was still living in Iran, the judiciary (Quviy-i Qasa'i-i) arrested and held him for two months. He was forced to sign a confession that was broadcast over Iranian television:

The confessions we signed said that we were detained under very good conditions, that we were not put into solitary confinement. That while detained we just had time to read and study the Qur'an and think about our past actions in which we were consciously or unconsciously painting a black picture of the Islamic Republic of Iran, that we were indirectly threatening national security. The confessions also had us thanking the judiciary for the opportunity to reflect on our crimes. The role of the confessions was to have an impact on society.⁵⁰

Memarian also alludes online to this confession. For example, within weeks of his release from prison, he wrote the following in his English-language weblog: "No confession letter can say even a piece of reality. It has some other message. You have probably understood the message. Haven't you?"⁵¹

A review of Memarian's archived weblog postings prior to October 2004 provides a number of potential reasons for his arrest. He had posted on the detainment of bloggers,⁵² including the arrest of Sayid Motallebi, which he tied explicitly to Sina Motallebi's blog postings.⁵³ He also discussed items censored from the mainstream press, such as the execution of an eighteen-year-old girl for adultery,⁵⁴ increased government filtering of the Internet,⁵⁵ prostitution,⁵⁶ live chat about youth and sex,⁵⁷ the abolishment of the compulsory hijab,⁵⁸ alcohol use in Iran,⁵⁹ the death of Zahra Kazimi,⁶⁰ and the Iranian nuclear program.⁶¹ He occasionally poked fun at clerics in a general way. For example, he wrote about the reaction to an earthquake by the people of Qum, a center of Shi'i learning in Iran: "It seems [they who] are closer to God are more fearful . . . (Just joking!)."⁶²

Finally, Memarian has been very critical in his weblog of former president Muhammad Khatami. In a posting on 11 May 2004 about a meeting between the president and young people to commemorate National Youth Day, Memarian posted a number of the provocative questions the young people had posed to Khatami: “Why didn’t you leave the power after all [the] pressure and violations?”⁶³ “Why were you silent when the conservatives [arrested] students four years ago?”⁶⁴ “How unfaithful are you?”⁶⁵ “Mr. President, do you sleep well at night?”⁶⁶

The way in which Memarian conceptualizes the parameters of civil society in Iran, particularly as they relate to Weblogistan, provides insight into the current political climate of blogging. The following is an excerpt from his blog posted during the summer of 2004:

NGOs have a political responsibility and a political function. But they cannot have political activities. In other words, they cannot get involved in the power-sharing process like a political party. But in many cases the activities of NGOs affect the political arrangement.⁶⁷

This quote, which describes the nature of NGOs in civil society, is more radical than it might appear at first to an outsider to Iranian politics. The word “political,” or *siyasi* in Persian, within contemporary Iranian politics denotes partisan or factious actions in a negative sense. “Political activities” are even understood by some Iranian authorities as attempts to overthrow the Islamic republic or to usurp governmental power. Therefore, NGOs and other members of civil society often deny their work is political.

Memarian takes a different tack in this posting by breaking down *siyasi* into a number of different meanings. He brackets the “power-sharing” (*ishtirak-i qudrat*) meaning of political as outside the realm of NGO activities: NGOs by their very definition are not governmental and therefore should not compete for, hold, or wield governmental power. They are also apolitical insofar as political is understood as partisan, because NGOs need to remain immune from changes in the presidency or majority in parliament. Memarian does, however, reserve a legitimate role for what he calls “political responsibility and function,” which can “affect the political arrangement.” Thus, although an NGO specifically, and civil society more generally, does not pursue political power, it can, according to Memarian, attempt to influence those who do have the responsibility and ability to govern.

After his release from prison, Memarian returned to the theme of civil society in a posting in which he linked the increasing pressures on Weblogistan to a broader crackdown on civil society:

Two months ago I wrote an article about the hopes and the fears in Iranian civil society . . . But a few days after writing this article . . . [I] was sent to the jail by conservatives because “of threats from civil society.” I never understood what my charges were. All my activities in civil society attempt to help the country in its development. But the conservatives are suspicious of civil society. They think the strengthening of civil society creates an instrument for the enemies of the regime to have influence in the Iranian system. This is paranoid, wastes resources, and puts activists at risk. I was a casualty of this paranoia . . . A timid writer, journalist, and civil-society advocate, I have never been a radical activist. I have never written something that crossed over the red lines of the regime, but they sent me to the jail, saying that “all I have done has been mistaken.”

What did they achieve? Does anybody believe the accusations against me? All my activities in the past years show how I have chosen to live my life. The confession letter is completely untrue. It has another message. You probably have understood the message. Haven't you?⁶⁸

According to Memarian in this entry, it is not his postings that are the reason for his arrest but rather his actual activities in the "real world," such as capacity-building workshops for NGOs. Again, as with Sina Motallebi, it is not weblogging per se that instigates the arrest, but the postings become a way to make the arrest possible.

At the same time, this entry helps us to better understand under what political conditions an activity like blogging might be considered dangerous. First, there is the association, also mentioned in Shariat Madari's editorial, between the Internet, blogging, and civil society and the West. Given Iran's current political self-definition against the West, and the corresponding anti-Western rhetoric of its leaders, any attempt to link aspects of civil society to the West mark them as antiregime, or political in the most negative sense of the word. During an interview with the authors, Memarian hinted that civil society as an entire sector is being linked to the West in an attempt to make participation in it "political" and therefore illegal under Iranian law.⁶⁹

Second, Memarian points out in his entry that young bloggers, not famous journalists or prestigious editors, were targeted in the 2003–04 arrests. Motallebi was thirty at the time of his arrest in 2003, Memarian was thirty at his 2004 arrest, and Sigarchi, who is still in prison, is currently twenty-nine. Although young, this group of bloggers has had a major influence on Weblogistan because of the popularity of their blogs (Motallebi) or the access to Weblogistan they gave to others through technical support or training (Memarian and Sigarchi). Again, it is not necessarily explicit political dissent that is perceived as a threat but rather the increased political influence of Iranian youth.

Third, although for his own safety Memarian does not post explicitly about the conditions under which his confession occurred, during an interview with the authors he confirmed he was coerced into signing a written confession,⁷⁰ which according to other sources included a confession to moral crimes.⁷¹ This indicates a link is being made between political dissent and religious morality by Iranian authorities, who use accusations of crimes against shari'a to silence political web postings. In other words, the conventional defense of morality serves to justify, legitimate, and stabilize the authority of power holders in Iran. On a general level, this demonstrates how shari'a has become *siyasi* in the Islamic republic and vice versa.

Arash Sigarchi: A Severe Prison Sentence

Arash Sigarchi was born in Rasht, Iran, in 1978. His father is the well-known musician Ahmad Sigarchi, but from an early age, Arash confessed a passion for journalism. He has worked in Tehran for the newspapers *Aftabgarban* and *Salam* and more recently with reformist papers. In 2000 he returned to the north of Iran and began working for *Gilan-i Imruz*, of which he became the chief editor in 2002. He transformed this publication from a four-page paper that distributed 300 copies three times a week to a sixteen-page daily, printed in color, with a distribution of 5,000.

According to Sigarchi, he was the first among a new generation of journalists within Iran to critique the killings of dissidents by the regime in the first decade of the Islamic

republic.⁷² He also attempted to expose conservatives' unpublicized agenda by printing their remarks in private meetings so that "people could more easily judge them."⁷³ Prior to his arrest he maintained a weblog called Panjiriy-i Ilitihab (Window of Anguish). His first entries were about Ali Afshari's arrest after he had participated in a conference in Berlin.⁷⁴ In general his weblog postings, like his print articles, express reformist ideals. However, unlike his articles, his web postings are not edited. During an interview with the authors, Sigarchi explained how the specific form of expression allowed by a blog contributed to his arrest:

The main reason for my arrest may have been the fact that I used to post the complete version of my articles in my weblog, without the changes of my editor, who censored for the newspaper. This included all the news, reports, and interviews I wrote. Anything I was unable to publish in print I would publish on my weblog.⁷⁵

On 28 August 2004 Sigarchi was called by Idariy-i Itilaat, Office of Intelligence, on his mobile and asked to surrender himself at intelligence headquarters. After contacting Reporters Without Borders, Sigarchi gave himself up to the authorities. He was detained for two days, released, and then rearrested on 17 January 2005, at which point his bail was set at 200 million *toman* (about U.S. \$200,000), the highest bail ever assigned to a journalist. On 22 February 2005 a judge from the third branch of the revolutionary court (Daggah-i Inqilab) of Gilan province sentenced him to fourteen years in prison on four separate charges: ten years for cooperation/collaboration with the United States, one year for inciting rebellion against the regime, one year for speaking against the Islamic regime, and two years for insulting the founder of the Islamic republic and the supreme leader.⁷⁶

These charges help clarify why bloggers are being targeted by Iranian authorities. In an interview with the authors while on temporary leave from prison, Sigarchi explained that the first charge was based on interviews he gave to Radio Farda, which is funded in part by the U.S. government.

The Iranian authorities reasoned that if someone is interviewed by Radio Farda, then they collaborate with Radio Farda. And since Radio Farda is financed in part by the American foreign ministry, by extension this individual collaborates with the United States. It is interesting that because of this pseudocooperation, I was sentenced to ten years in prison. What is more interesting is that the Iranian authorities didn't even pay attention to the content of the interviews.⁷⁷

As in the case with Memarian, it was not so much the content of the interview but rather the interview itself that signaled a connection to the West and alarmed Iranian authorities.

In contrast, the second charge—inciting rebellion—was based on the content of his writings. According to Sigarchi, the prosecutor specifically cited the articles and interviews he had published in traditional print media about the 1999 student demonstrations and gatherings against the regime.⁷⁸

According to Sigarchi, the third charge—speaking against the regime—also explicitly cited his blog postings:

The sentence of the revolutionary court [Dadgah-i Inqilab] stated that "the writings of this unpleasant element (they probably meant me) in the newspaper *Gilan Imruz* under his management and

his weblog [Panjiriy-i Ilitihab] were propaganda against the holy regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran. They said the defendant is trying to destroy and weaken the face of the able regime.⁷⁹

The fourth charge was insulting the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, and the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. Sigarchi admits to criticizing (*intiqad*) Khamenei in his weblog, but he is quick to make a distinction between criticisms and insults:

In many of my weblog entries, I insisted on letting Mr. Khamenei, the leader of Iran, know his mistakes. I did not see any faults in doing this since according to the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, myself and the leader of the country are equals! . . . In one article I had asked the leader to stop his obsession with nuclear power, which is pushing the country over the edge. In the court they used this article as the evidence of insulting the leadership [*tuhin bih rahbari*] in order to sentence me to two years in prison.⁸⁰

This charge was based on Article 514 of the Islamic Penal Code of Iran. This category of insult, called *tuhin*, carries a sentence of six months to two years according to the code; Sigarchi received the maximum sentence. This is another example of how closely intertwined *siyasi* and shari'ah are in Iran, with theological or moral issues cited as reasons for the need to limit public expression.

On appeal, the first two charges (collaboration with the United States and inciting rebellion) were dropped, leaving Sigarchi with a sentence of three years for insulting Khomeini and Khamenei and for criticizing the Islamic republic. These remaining charges were also the ones for which the judge explicitly referenced Sigarchi's weblog entries as evidence of his crime. That the court dropped the first two charges, which are more clearly political actions, demonstrates one of two things: either the Iranian authorities' real concern was curtailing the *expression* of political and moral ideas within Weblogistan (versus preventing actual political actions taken by Sigarchi), or the charges dependent on evidence from blog entries were easier to prove. In either case, as with Motallebi and Memarian, blogs provided an opportunity for increased scrutiny and regulation of expression.

CONCLUSIONS: WEBLOGISTAN AS A FORM OF EXPRESSION

The arrests of bloggers in 2003 and 2004 make it clear that Internet postings are not immune to governmental attempts to regulate political discourse in Iran. At the same time, however, blogging does represent an emerging⁸¹ form of expression in Iran. The task remains in this concluding section to parse out what the arrests of bloggers tell us about the specific form of expression enabled in a Persian blog in the Islamic republic.

Iranian authorities and bloggers perceive blogging as a platform of expression for ordinary citizens, especially young people. From the point of view of the conservative judiciary, this platform is potentially a threat to the Islamic republic. Whether real or imaginary, this threat undergirds the responses of the judiciary to Weblogistan. From the point of view of the bloggers we interviewed, Weblogistan is an alternative to traditional forms of journalism. Motallebi began blogging after being censored in conventional print media, Memarian's blogs discuss aspects of civil society and social issues neglected by

the mainstream press, and Sigarchi blogs in order to publish articles free from his editor's pen.

In addition, for both bloggers and Iranian authorities, online rhetoric is not perceived as separate from, but rather integral to, political power in the "the real world" of the Islamic republic. Blogs are written in Persian so that they are accessible to the five million Internet users in Iran. Iranian authorities monitor and regulate blogs because they are read by Iranian citizens and can influence offline opinions about the government, clerics, and Islam.

These central assumptions (blogging is a new medium, and blogging is enmeshed in local politics) shape the sort of expression that occurs in blogs in contemporary Iran. The unedited quality of blogs encouraged bloggers to take more chances with their online discourse. This was met with increased scrutiny, even of more diary-like reflections on Iranian life. Personal expression in Weblogistan extends to archives and even readers' comments. "Always-on, always-linked, always-archived, always-immediate,"⁸² the blog form also generated unintended consequences.

Although blogging practices have expanded the scope of government monitoring of expression, the strategies on which the judiciary drew in 2004 were grounded in existing political rhetoric and tactics. On a general level, these strategies involved accusing bloggers, as political dissenters, of moral depravity, thus using the full power of the Islamic republic to marginalize its critics. On a more specific level, those who wanted to silence bloggers deployed the Westoxication argument, so powerful against the Shah during the 1979 revolution. In this narrative, Weblogistan entails a covert foreign invasion, because it has an "American identity but an Iranian passport."

However, the effect of the Iranian political context on Weblogistan does not begin with the 2004 crackdown. We learn from the three bloggers interviewed for this article that tactics for normalizing blogging as a form of political expression compatible with an Islamic republic began even before these arrests. Memarian's theory for the proper role of Weblogistan within civil society is a specific example. Despite postings in Weblogistan that push against regulations of traditional print media, all the bloggers are careful not to directly attack the Islamic republic. They may at times be critical of the republic—in Sigarchi's postings on the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, Motallebi's postings on the government's treatment of political prisoners, and Memarian's postings on former president Khatami—but none of them calls for the overthrow of the government or admits to insulting the former or current supreme leader. They are by their own admission careful to avoid political statements. With phrases like "in my current position, I'd prefer not to talk about it," Memarian often signals to his reader that he is self-censoring on political issues.⁸³ They all practice a form of self-censorship, which increased after, but did not originate with, the 2004 crackdown. In a few years Persian-language blogging has matured enough to begin to create its own customs so as to not challenge the legitimacy of the Iranian republic.

Taken together, these insights into Weblogistan help explain the characteristics of Persian blogging as a form of expression—and the overly optimistic initial Western press coverage. Weblogistan must be understood not only through the medium, form, or genre of blogging, but also through the local social, cultural, and political context in Iran.

Considering the form of blogging, we can take our lead from pioneers in the field of media studies, such as McLuhan, who argues that "the medium is the message," because

the medium “determines the modes of perception and the matrix of assumptions within which objectives are set.”⁸⁴ However, the medium does not tell the complete story. In fact, exclusive attention to the medium led Western journalists to read blogs only in terms of their revolutionary potential. This early optimism about the power of Weblogistan was based on the idea that blogging presented Iranians with a public forum for the exchange of ideas free from government intervention or control. Blogging as a medium was meant to entail its own sort of freedom, which in many ways conformed to the expectations of the liberal West: the right to free expression independent of any local political, cultural, social, or legal pressures.

In addition to the medium, the context within which expression is created and consumed must also be taken into account. The future for any medium is determined by the social and political realities within which it is introduced and practiced. This article has focused on how the political legacy of postrevolutionary Iran affects expression in Weblogistan. However, it just as easily could have focused on other dimensions of the Iranian context. For example, what impact has the rich Persian literary tradition had on the content and form of Persian-language blogs? How was the spread of blogging made possible by the Islamic republic’s education policies, which included establishing new public schools and national literacy campaigns?⁸⁵ Prior to the 1979 revolution Khomeini’s lectures circulated on audiocassettes, making the success of the current Islamic republic due in part to its own utilization of new forms of popular media. What is the particular relationship between modern forms of media and Iranian politics? Is there a similarity between the importance Shi’a put on *taqlid* and the ways in which bloggers gain a loyal following? Weblogistan is grounded in prior cultural, religious, and political assumptions about the relationships between communication, culture, and individual expression. This article has only begun such an investigation.

Finally, it is through the interaction of the medium and the context, the form of a blog and the Islamic Republic of Iran, that we begin to understand an ethical ambiguity in the practice of blogging. Weblogistan is simultaneously a forum for effecting social change and enforcing the political status quo because of the interaction between a new medium and an existing context. Blogs do allow new actors (such as youth) to challenge existing religious authority, but they are not completely free of that authority. Weblogistan does have the ability to convey information and even craft a specific type of citizen, but it cannot operate outside traditional forms of state control. When blogging is at its most politically powerful, it risks its greatest punishment.

Of most importance, the emergent form of expression within Weblogistan creates corresponding opportunities for new forms of governance. Weblog content became the reason for arrests, and by providing evidence, it made the arrests possible. Weblogs often offer easy links to archived postings, making authors accountable for comments out of their original context. Weblogistan is therefore not only a revolution within the Islamic Revolution but also an opportunity “for the revolution to eat its children.”⁸⁶

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Hossein Derakhshan, “Weblogistan: How Weblogs are Affecting Iran,” posted 9 April 2005, <http://hoder.com/weblog/archives/013982.shtml> (accessed 29 February 2008); Khodadad Rezaekhani, “Editorials without Editors: How Weblogs Are Changing the Iranian Youth Community in the Web,” posted

February 2003, www.iranologie.com/ewe.htm (accessed 29 February 2008); Alfred Hermida, "Web Gives a Voice to Iranian Women," BBC Online News, 17 June 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/2044802.stm> (accessed 29 February 2008); Mehdi Jami, "Iranian Blogs Take on the Election," BBC News, 17 June 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4099380.stm (accessed 29 February 2008); Fereshteh Nourae-Simone, "Wings of Freedom: Iranian Women, Identity, and Cyberspace," in *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era*, ed. F. Nourae-Simone (New York: Feminist Press, 2005), 61–79; Amir Ebrahimi, "Performance in Everyday Life and the Rediscovery of the 'Self' in Iranian Weblogs," *Bad Jens* (September 2004), www.badjens.com/rediscovery.html (accessed 10 March 2006); and Nasrin Alavi, *We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Soft Skull Press, 2005).

²Nourae-Simone "Wings of Freedom," 62. Weblogistan is characterized by sociologist Masserat Amir Ebrahimi as a semiprivate "alter" space, where honest performance of a "true self" can take place. Amir Ebrahimi, "Performance," 1.

³Alavi, *We Are Iran*, 7.

⁴*Ibid.*, 361.

⁵The regulation of bloggers is not limited to Iran. In February 2007 an Egyptian weblogger was put on trial for writing blogs that criticized Islam and Egyptian authorities. See Amnesty International press release, "Egypt: Trial of blogger expands realm of repression," 1 February 2007, www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?lang=e&id=ENGMDE120042007 (accessed 14 March 2008).

⁶Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of Persian blogs are the authors'. We interviewed Omid Memarian and Arash Sigarchi in 2006 and relied on an extensive interview conducted by Mark Glaser with Sina Motalebi in 2004 titled "Iranian Journalist Credits Blogs for Playing Key Role in His Release From Prison," *Online Journalism Review*, 9 January 2004, www.ojr.org/ojr/glaser/1073610866.php (accessed 6 March 2008). When the authors contacted Motalebi about interviewing him about his arrest, he requested that we use this published interview.

⁷Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message," in *Essential McLuhan*, ed. Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 151–61.

⁸For a more detailed account of the medium of blogging, see Dan Burnstein, "Introduction: From Cave Painting to Wonketter: A Short History of Blogging," in *Blog!*, ed. David Kline and Dan Burnstein (New York: CDS Books, 2005), xi–xxvi.

⁹The first Persian blog was posted 7 September 2001 by Salman Jariri. www.globalpersian.com/salman/weblog.html (accessed 6 March 2008).

¹⁰www.blogherald.com/2005/10/10/the-blog-herald-blog-count-october-2005/ (accessed 6 March 2008).

¹¹www.khamenei.ir/ (accessed 6 March 2008).

¹²www.president.ir/fa (accessed 6 March 2008).

¹³For example, the past two Iranian presidents maintain blogs: Sayid Muhammad Khatami, president of Iran, 1997–2005, <http://khatami.ir/> (accessed 6 March 2008); Hashimi Rafsanjani, president of Iran, 1989–97, www.hasemirafsanjani.ir (accessed 6 March 2008). A number of prominent religious leaders also publish blogs: Ayatollah Misbah Yazdi, www.mesbahyazdi.org/english/ (accessed 6 March 2008); Ayatollah Hussayn 'Ali Muntaziri, www.montazeri.com/ (accessed 6 March 2008); Ayatollah Fazil Lankarani, www.lankarani.org/eng/ (accessed 6 March 2008), and Ayatollah Sayid Muhammad Sadiq Ruhani, www.emamrohani.net/ (accessed 6 March 2008).

¹⁴Iranian Press Law, ratified 19 March 1986. Article 2 (a) and Article 1. English translation by parstimes, www.parstimes.com/law/Iran_law.html#Press (accessed 6 March 2008).

¹⁵"To endeavor to negate the drawing up of false and divisive lines, or, pitting different groups of the community against each other by the practices such." *Ibid.*, Article 2 (c).

¹⁶"To campaign against manifestations of imperialistic culture (such as extravagance, dissipation, debauchery, love of luxury, spread of morally corrupt practices, etc.) and to propagate and promote genuine Islamic culture and sound ethical principles." *Ibid.*, Article 2 (d).

¹⁷*Ibid.*, Article 4.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, Article 6.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, Article 6 (iii).

²⁰*Ibid.*, Article 6 (i).

²¹*Ibid.*, Article 6 (v).

²²*Ibid.*, Article 6 (vii).

²³Ibid., Article 6 (viii).

²⁴Ibid., Article 26, 31. *Islamic Penal Code of Iran*, Book 5, Chapter 2, "Insulting the Religious Sanctities or State Officials" (Article 513, 514); Chapter 15, "Personal Insults" (Article 608, 609); Chapter 18, "Offenses against Public Morality" (Article 640); Chapter 27, "Libels and Revilements" (Article 697, 698, 700).

²⁵*Press Law*, Article 27, 30. It is interesting that the same law has provisions for the rights of the press to critique and dissent: "The press have the right to publish the opinions, constructive criticisms, suggestions, and explanations of individuals and government officials for public information while duly observing the Islamic teachings and the best interest of the community. Constructive criticism should be based on logic and reason and void of insult, humiliation and detrimental effects."

Ibid., Article 3. This is a tenuous mandate to act as a public critic. However, the extreme level of qualification makes it difficult to realize in practice.

²⁶"Iran Annual Report 2004," Reporters Without Borders, www.rsf.org/print.php3?id_article=9940 (accessed 9 September 2006).

²⁷For example, in an interview with CNN Hossein Derakhshan stated, "In the absence of free papers, [weblogs] are performing an important role for spreading internal news that is very risky to publish in Iran." As quoted by Erin McLaughlin, "Iran keeps an eye on the bloggers," 18 July 2003, <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/07/16/iran.blogs> (accessed 6 March 2008). Alireza Doostadar has pointed out that these articles have been "overly and naively enthusiastic in extolling the social changes that are (or are wished to be) coming about as a consequence of the adoption of a new communication medium by a small percentage of Iranians." Alireza Doostdar, "'The Vulgar Spirit of Blogging': On Language, Culture, and Power in Persian Weblogistan," *American Anthropologist* 106 (2004): 653.

²⁸As quoted in Bill Berkeley, "Bloggers vs. Mullahs: How the Internet Roils Iran," *World Policy Journal* (Spring 2006): 72. See also Jackie Granick, "Nixing the News: Iranian Internet Censorship," *Defining Power* 27, no. 2 (2005): 11–12.

²⁹Ibid. See also Stop Censoring Us postings from 28 October 2004 and 22 November 2004, <http://stop.censoring.us> (accessed 6 March 2008).

³⁰Ayatollah Makarim Shirazi was appointed to the first council of representatives and played an important role in writing the current Iranian constitution in 1979. See www.makaremshirazi.org (accessed 6 March 2008).

³¹Nazila Fathi, "Iran Jails More Journalists and Blocks Web Sites," *New York Times*, 8 December 2004, 10.

³²Hussayn Shariat Madari, "Khaniy-i Ankabut" (the spider's web), *Kayhan*, 29 September 2004, www.kayhannews.ir/830708/2.htm (accessed 5 September 2006).

³³Ibid.

³⁴Arash Sigarchi, interview with the authors in Persian by phone and e-mail, August 2006.

³⁵Sina Motallebi was specifically named as a member of the spider's web who was a link to Europe. Omid Memarian, Hanif Mazrui, Babak Ghafari, Shahram Rafizadah, Rozbah MirIbrahimi, and Shadi Sadr were among others mentioned (their names were abbreviated) as spider's web members working in Iran.

³⁶Omid Memarian, interview with authors via phone, Berkeley, Calif., 29 September 2006.

³⁷Glaser, "Iranian Journalist," 2.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹www.petitiononline.com/sina/ (accessed 6 March 2008).

⁴⁰Interview with Clark Boyd, quoted in "The Price Paid for Blogging Iran," BBC News, 21 February 2005.

⁴¹Memarian, interview.

⁴²Glaser, "Iranian Journalist," 3.

⁴³For example, Motallebi said during his interview with Glaser, "Weblogs are a good experience where everyone can explain their ideas. And the government is very afraid of them." Ibid.

⁴⁴Sayid Murtazavi also headed Court 1410, known as the Press Court. He is now the Tehran chief prosecutor. For more information on Murtazavi, see Reporters Sans Frontieres, "Iran 2003 Annual Report," www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=6688 (accessed 6 March 2008). See also Human Rights Watch, "False Freedom, Online Censorship in the Middle East and North Africa" 17, no. 10 (2005): 45–46.

⁴⁵Glaser, "Iranian Journalist," 3.

⁴⁶Ibid., 4.

⁴⁷Memarian, interview.

⁴⁸Omid Memarian has posted on three blogs: Omid Memarian, www.memarian.info (accessed 6 March 2008), Persian and English, established January 2003; *Iranian Prospect*, <http://omid.memarian.blogspot.com>,

English, established August 2003; and Konj-Daily Comment, <http://omemarian.blogspot.com>, Persian, established January 2003. For this article we drew primarily from postings on Omid Memarian, because this is the weblog he was best known for in Iran prior to his arrest in 2004 and it is the weblog that is currently "active." However, postings on this blog from 21 July 2003 to 22 July 2004 and 22 September to 20 December 2004 are no longer included in the online archives. For these dates we rely on Memarian's postings on Iranian Prospect.

⁴⁹Memarian, Iranian Prospect.

⁵⁰Memarian, interview.

⁵¹Memarian, "Two Months Away," Iranian Prospect, 20 December 2004. Another blogger we interviewed claimed Memarian was among the bloggers who were forced to confess to a sexual affair with a fellow female blogger, Fīristah Qazī, although Memarian would not confirm this during our interview. Adultery, or *zinā'*, is a crime according to Iranian law. *Zinā'* is defined by Article 63 of the Iranian Penal Code as the act of intercourse "between a man and a woman who are forbidden to each other." The punishment for *zinā'* ranges from 100 lashes to death by stoning, depending on whether the crime is committed by an unmarried or married woman. The latter case is called *zinā' muḥṣina* and carries the death sentence. The charge of *zinā'* is complicated by the number of articles in the penal code that deal with this crime. Articles 63–68, 73–76, 78, 81–86, 88, 90–93, 100, and 102 all deal with the definition of *zinā'* and its punishments. Proving adultery is very difficult. According to Article 68, both parties must confess four times to receive the maximum punishment; otherwise punishment is left to the discretion of the judge. According to Articles 74 and 75, if the parties do not confess, the crime can be proven by eyewitness testimony (by two or four men, depending on the crime). Usually such witnesses have to have been present for the act of penetration.

⁵²On 5 September 2004 Memarian posted the following on his blog in English: "[Yesterday] one of my friends in Hayatinu Newspaper called me and was surprised that I answered him. 'I [thought] you [were] arrested,' he said. I was surprised too. I asked him that why he thinks I have to be in the prison. He explain that two friends of us are has been arrested on Tuesday. One of them Babak write artistic articles and comments. He mentioned that there is list of writers that they believe they will arrest in the coming days. I don't know really what to say. Because, I haven't been active in the political sphere during the last year. During the last two years the number of my political articles and comments are less than 10. I think that there is no reason for arresting young journalists and writers like me of my friends in newspapers because we are the kids of revolution. What happened for the revolution that after 25 years is trying to eat its children?" Omid Memarian, "New Round of Arrests," Omid Memarian, 9 September 2004. See also the following, posted later in Persian: "The arrest of three young journalists (Babak Ghafari, Sharif Zade, and Hanif Mazroee) has uniquely shocked other youth working in the media . . . I know Babak from Hayatah-Nu newspaper. He was humble and hardworking. He wrote on national and international cinema. I don't understand how Babak can be a threat to this country. . . . I am really worried. If Babak can be a danger to this country, then so can about fifty million other young people . . . By arresting young journalists such as Babak they are trying to create an atmosphere of fear amongst journalists." Omid Memarian, "In Bachiha Chih Khabari Baray-i Mamlakat Darand?" (How Are These Kids Any Threat to This Country?), Omid Memarian, 10 September 2004.

⁵³In Iran it is difficult for journalists to write about what happened to Sina. Conservatives are now suspicious of web writers. Arresting the families of journalists instead of the journalists is a new and shameful way to stop them and restrict freedom of speech in Iran. Omid Memarian, "Dastgiry-i Pidarrah Sina Motallebi va Bargah Zarini Digar" (The Arrest of Sina Motallebi's Father and Yet Another Golden Leaf), Omid Memarian, 16 September 2004.

⁵⁴Omid Memarian, "Execution, Everyone Believe It!" Omid Memarian (31 August 2004).

⁵⁵Omid Memarian, "Bastih Shudan-i Sitay-i Siyasi" (The Blockage of Political Internet Sites), Omid Memarian, 26 September 2004.

⁵⁶Memarian, "Execution, Everyone Believe It!"

⁵⁷Omid Memarian, "Iranian Youths Chat About Love and Sex," Omid Memarian, 7 August 2004. See also Omid Memarian, "Yik Naguftaniy-i Hajim" (A Vast Unmentionable), Shargh, 4 July 2004, www.memarian.info/articles.asp?id=1463303512 (accessed 6 March 2008).

⁵⁸Omid Memarian, "Libas-i Zanan: Masalih In Ast!" (Women's Clothing: This is the Issue!), Omid Memarian, 4 September 2004. Idem, "Izhar-i Nazar 'Jumhuriy-i Islami' Dar Muridah Libas-i Zir Banovanih Irani" (The Commentary of the "Islamic Republic" on Iranian Ladies' Underwear), Omid Memarian, 5 September 2004; idem, "Jashn-i Khanih-i Cinema, Hanuz Sujyi Dagh Ast . . ." (The Festival of House of Cinema, Still a Hot Topic . . .), Omid Memarian, 14 September 2004.

⁵⁹Omid Memarian, "Alcohol Drink in the Islamic Country," Iranian Prospect (17 May 2004).

⁶⁰Link on Memarian's blog on 24 July 2004 to Association of Iranian Journalists, "The State of Journalism in Iran," http://omidmemarian.blogspot.com/2004_07_01_archive.html (accessed 6 March 2008).

⁶¹Omid Memarian, "Nuclear Program: Nobody Knew about It," *Iranian Prospect*, 15 September 2004.

⁶²Omid Memarian, untitled post, *Iranian Prospect*, 28 May 2004.

⁶³Omid Memarian, "Aghay-i Rais Jumhur! Aya Shabha Khaab-i Rahat-i Darid" (Mr. President! Do You Sleep Well at Night?), Omid Memarian, 11 May 2004.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Omid Memarian, untitled post, *Iranian Prospect*, 23 June 2004.

⁶⁸Omid Memarian, "Two Months Away," *Iranian Prospect*, 9 December 2004. During the fall of 2004 there was a wave of arrests of civil-society activists, including traditional journalists. Among the webloggers were Arash Sigarchi, Mujtaba Saminijad, Farnaz Ghazizadah, Babak Ghafuri Azar, Shahram Rafi Zadah, and Firishah Ghazi. Mahbubah Abasquilizadah, an NGO activist, was also arrested. See Amnesty International, "Iran: Civil Society Activists and Human Rights Defenders Under Attack," Amnesty International press release, 10 November 2004.

⁶⁹Memarian, interview.

⁷⁰"I spent two days in solitary confinement. . . . Having no connection to the outside world can be a kind of torture, especially for people like me, whose job it is to be thinking and interacting with others, to have to go into a room that is one by two meters was so destructive. The whole thing was very humiliating. So when they ask you to do something, like sign a confession, you accept. I was afraid I was approaching 'my irreversible point'—the point after which I [could not] return to my life as myself." Ibid.

⁷¹Arash Sigarchi, interview by authors via phone and e-mail from Rasht, Iran, 18 August 2006.

⁷²During the interview, Sigarchi asserted that his critiques were not whether the dissidents were right or wrong but rather stemmed from his strong belief in freedom of thought and expression. Sigarchi stated, "No one should be killed because of their beliefs," and therefore the republic should be held accountable for its actions. Ibid.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ali Afshari spent two years in prison after the infamous conference in Berlin, where participants gathered to discuss reform in Iran. He currently lives in Washington, D.C., as a recipient of a fellowship from the National Endowment for Democracy.

⁷⁵Sigarchi, interview.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸The largest student-led demonstrations since the 1979 revolution took place in July 1999, on 18 Tir, according to the Iranian calendar. Students protested for political reform and increased freedom of the press; a number were injured, and some were killed during the protests. Demonstrations to commemorate the 1999 protests have been held annually on 18 Tir. For more information see "Iran Student Protests: Five Years On," BBC News, 9 July 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3879535.stm (accessed 6 March 2008), and "The Protests Which Shook Iran: Special Report," BBC News, 12 September 1999, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/394155.stm (accessed 6 March 2008).

⁷⁹Sigarchi, interview.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Our use here of the adverb "emerging" instead of the adjective "new" is not merely semantic. It is meant to convey that Weblogistan is emerging from other forms. Michael M. J. Fischer, "Emergent Forms of Life: Anthropologies of Late or Postmodernities," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28 (1999): 455–78. See also Michael M. J. Fischer, *Emergent Forms of Life and the Anthropological Voice* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003). Two excellent articles that focus on different aspects of Weblogistan have found Fischer's category useful. In her study of the public and private in Iranian diaspora weblogs, Janet Alexanian has drawn on Fischer to characterize cyberspace as an emergent form of life insofar as it "is constantly in process of changing, challenging the stability of concepts of the self, intimacy, identity, and community." Janet Alexanian, "Publicly Intimate Online: Iranian Web Logs in Southern California," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 26, no. 1 (2006): 134. Also invoking Fischer's category, although less explicitly, Alireza Doostdar explores how the structural features and social interactions in Weblogistan make blogging an emergent speech genre. Doostdar, "The Vulgar Spirit," 651–62. This article differs from

these earlier ones in that we explore the emergent genre of blogging specifically through the political context of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

⁸²Burnstein, "Introduction," xxvi.

⁸³Omid Memarian, "Falling Short on Vision," Iranian Prospect, 17 July 2004.

⁸⁴Marshall McLuhan, *McLuhan: Hot & Cold*, ed. G. Stearn (New York: Dial Press, 1967), 157.

⁸⁵According to the World Bank, by 2002 84 percent of men and 70 percent of women were literate in Iran; there were 72 computers per 1,000 people in 2003. World Bank, *2005 Little Data Book* (Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2005), 111.

⁸⁶Omid Memarian, Iranian Prospect, 5 September 2004. The Persian is *enqilab bachihayash ra mikhurad*.