Introduction: Nascent Networks

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The sense of excitement that accompanied the introduction of the Internet in the 1990s to the general public continues to inspire hopeful speculation about its potentials more than a decade into the new millennium. In the case of Iran, the advent of and rapid developments in Internet technologies coincided with a number of tumultuous shifts inside the country and its immediate neighborhood, intensifying the sense that positive transformations were on the horizon. During the more than fifteen years since resident and Diaspora Iranians have taken to the Internet, a number of remarkable changes have occurred. From producing and participating in one of the most vibrant blogospheres during the early days of Web 2.0 to capturing and disseminating audiovisual content during the massive demonstrations following the June 2009 presidential election, Iranians have established a place online and have captured international attention in so doing.¹

Yet the digital era has not been without its disappointments. While new technologies continue to be heralded for their utility in confronting state powers, the ruling structure in Iran survived a series of challenges that the Internet magnified, in the process emboldening some of its most reactionary elements. In addition, government entities took to digital media, using them to disseminate cultural products that strengthened the government’s position. Other segments not linked to the Iranian government, from independent users to those whose participation is enabled by support from other states, have also revealed a number of troubling tendencies such as cultivating exclusionary ideologies or using their presence on the Internet to inflate...
the extent to which they represent Iranian society. In short, although popular accounts proliferate about the Internet and its promising implications for Iranian culture, politics, and society, the field of analysis remains rich and largely unexplored. Focusing on the years spanning from roughly 1998 through 2012, this book examines often-overlooked terrains of the Iranian Internet. I examine which elements have been discounted and why, revealing a complex and contradictory landscape that presents reasons for both concern and celebration.

The Iranian Internet provides my conceptual framework as well as the site of analysis. It is not “Iranian” in any straightforward way, nor is it confined to a technology or space captured by the all-encompassing term “the Internet.” It is more than simply “Iranian” because it flows across national borders and includes material written about Iran in both Persian and other languages. It is more than simply “the Internet” because it follows the converging connections between online and offline and identifies how they often reciprocally shape one another. The Iranian Internet is not one but many places. It is frequented and inhabited by geographically and ideologically dispersed participants, and it is always contested, always changing.

My conceptualization of the Iranian Internet has been influenced by ethnographies and works in media history that offer insights for analyzing technologies at the moment when they are still “new.” The ethnographic scholarship that assessed the Internet in its early years has been particularly useful. Relatively early on, ethnographers argued that any examination of the Internet should be grounded in the material realities that give rise to new technologies and shape the ways they are used. These accounts emphasized the importance of treating the Internet as both a site and a product of cultural production (Hine 2000; Miller and Slater 2000).

Understanding the Internet as a “new” medium, especially in light of the rapidity of its developments, poses difficulties in methods and definition. At times, the progression from emerging to new to established media seems to occur before one has had the opportunity to grasp the technology in question. What is emergent media at one moment becomes merely new in the next and may be categorized as established soon thereafter. Influential works in media history have demystified the notion of “new” media. They have stressed the
importance of assessments of new media that ground their analysis in the specific and contested social, political, and legal conditions of a technology’s emergence; that pay attention to how diverse users play a role in defining and assimilating a new medium; and that highlight the continuities and relationships between new and previously existing technologies (Altman 2004; Gitelman 2006; Marvin 1988).

If this book is cautious in its assessment of emerging technologies and media practices, it has taken cues from findings in several disciplines. Speaking specifically about diasporas, Benedict Anderson was prescient in warning against uses of new telecommunication technologies for the purpose of intensifying absolutist nationalist sentiments (Anderson 1998). Ethnographers confirmed Anderson’s insight, drawing attention to the ways that the transnational medium of the Internet has been used to strengthen—rather than to challenge—nationalism and other exclusionary ideologies (Ang 2001; Lal 1999; Ong 2003; Sorenson and Matsuoka 2001). Since these early works, cautionary accounts have emerged in other fields. The most visible of these has been the work of legal scholars, who have found an audience among mainstream readers. This work ranges from those that present somewhat alarmist claims about the destructive consequences of the Internet for democracy and education (Sunstein 2007) to those that may critique the trajectory of new media developments but offer prescriptions for how to return to the right path (Lessig 2001; Lessig 2004; Zittrain 2008). While my approach and my assessments do not fall in any one place along the spectrum of pessimistic or utopian assessments of the Internet, I share with Lawrence Lessig and Jonathan Zittrain a sense that problematic developments in digital media can provide lessons about achieving its promising potential in the future.

If the Internet as object of study poses challenges arising from its fluidity as a site of analysis and the speed of technological developments, examining Iranian politics and culture are rife with equal difficulties. Both Iran’s state powers and members of oppositional groups are notoriously factionalized, and shifts occur regularly but unpredictably. Fields of cultural production are similarly dynamic: organs of the state, government-supported entities, dissident artists and activists, and apolitical individuals and institutions who have competing visions about the nature and identity of the Iranian state and society
participate as content producers. These complexities are mirrored and intensified through new media technologies and require analyses that are in tune with the richness of media developments and the social and political contexts in which they are received. Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany have suggested in their book on the blogosphere that understanding the digital turn in Iranian media requires that it be assessed in the context of previous and existing policies, technologies, and political dynamics (Sreberny and Khiabany 2011).

Other important factors that are relevant to a study of the Iranian Internet can be found in Iranian studies scholarship that has addressed various media, cultural products, and/or forms of state power. Recognizing the importance of images and visual cultures in contemporary Iran, Roxanne Varzi and Negar Mottahedeh have examined a range of representational practices and their relevance to expressions of state power and resistance (Mottahedeh 2008; Varzi 2006). Highlighting the gendered constructions of notions of community and nation in postrevolution Iran, Minoo Moallem has provided extensive analysis of written and visual texts (Moallem 2005). Her assessment of fundamentalism in Iran provides an important guide for my attempts to make sense of the relationship between the Iranian state and emergent media. Among the rare few whose work on Iran and media explicitly calls for an analysis of how state powers actively use—rather than merely repress and disrupt—communication technologies, Gholam Khiabany has uncovered the complex and often-contradictory relationship of the Iranian state to various forms of media (Khiabany 2010).

In tune with Khiabany’s approach, which acknowledges repressive government tactics vis-à-vis media but reveals a range of proactive uses of new technologies, I trace developments in the state’s engagement with the Internet from the dawn of Web 1.0 to the era of social media. Authority in Iran is distributed unevenly in dynamic and contested ways, and parallel and redundant institutions compete with each other. My use of the term “state” or “state powers” is not meant to elide the complexities of the ruling structure or to reify it as a singular entity that stands against another singular entity captured by terms such as “the people” or “the opposition.” It is simply shorthand that allows me to follow how various elements of the ruling
structure—specifically those that dominate and have the most to lose in power struggles—have been active in using media technologies to build and entrench their presence both online and off.

The history of the Iranian state’s involvement with the Internet reveals a curious combination of tactics. On the one hand, the government has developed the telecommunications infrastructure needed for the Internet to function. The state and its affiliates (such as the Revolutionary Guards) are also the main owners and investors in the telecommunication and information industry infrastructure (Sreberny and Khiabany 2011). It also grants permission to and sets the conditions for privately owned Internet service providers (ISPs). In a basic sense, the state has complete control over the Internet inside Iran: if it chooses to, it can collapse the entire system. For example, after the disputed 2009 election, the state did not shut down the Internet. For the most part, its mechanisms for controlling the Internet have been restricted to filtering content and limiting speed; the latter is a favorite tactic during periods of actual or anticipated political upheaval. Other repressive forms of power have included surveillance and the harassment and in some cases detention of Internet users.

The explanation for why the ruling establishment has not chosen complete technology blackout can be found in other aspects of its relationship to new media. Iranian state institutions and actors have long been savvy users of various forms of media, and their responses to digital technologies have been no different. The Iranian state has a two-pronged strategy for dealing with digital media: a well-documented set of repressive mechanisms that functions alongside a vast but largely overlooked set of practices for actively using the Internet as a site for producing and disseminating favorable political speech and cultural products. These two complementary prongs mostly appear to operate independently: that is to say, without reference to one another. Yet the relationships and interconnections between them become evident in times of tumult. Indeed, not long after the post-2009 election demonstrations, which was arguably the biggest crisis of legitimacy for the Islamic Republic since its founding after the 1979 revolution, the state articulated a strategy for a “soft war” that indicates the explicit coming together of heretofore parallel approaches to both new media and new cultural products.
Considering the digital media activities of state powers, state actors, and supporters of the state constitutes only one line of inquiry in my analysis of aspects of the Iranian Internet that are overlooked, unexamined, and/or unappreciated. These include voices and topics that are ripe for analysis but that get sidelined because of the ideology of content producers or, more frequently, assumptions about the ideologies of content producers. Uncovering these elements of the Iranian Internet requires a deep exploration of Internet-enabled transnational expressions of combat and collaboration in a range of venues, including blogs, audiovisual posts, the comments sections of popular Web sites, and social media sites. In all the periods I consider here, the many examples of translocal and transnational connectivity offer much to celebrate. Indeed, given the geographical and ideological diversity, at times the mere fact that the Iranian Internet provides a gathering place for those with disparate views is remarkable. Even more noteworthy are the rare instances when participants agree that their Internet-based collaborations have been successful or when competing points of view are settled in a way that approximates exchanges in an ideal public sphere.

Chapter 1, “Reembodied Nationalisms,” begins with the formative years of the Internet in the late 1990s. Inside Iran, these years coincided with the surprising victory of the reformists, who had been supported in large part by a youthful population that was either too young to remember or was not yet born during the 1979 revolution. Young people who were voting for the first time and Iranians who were newly energized by the shifting political terrain were also among the earliest participants on the Internet. Yet it was members of the Iranian Diaspora—particularly those who were writing in a non-Iranian language—who initially dominated the Iranian Internet and influenced discourses and practices online. Technical proficiency is largely responsible for the strong early presence of Diaspora members; they had access to the resources and the language skills required to take full advantage of the new technology. While the development of infrastructure inside Iran and the appearance of Unicode for Persian fonts would soon shift the balance, analysis of the first years of the Iranian Internet requires an assessment of the role of Diaspora in particular.
This chapter uncovers sites of intense activity and analyzes what they reveal about the Iranian Internet in its infancy. Issues related to the naming of the Persian Gulf were among the first to catalyze transnational mobilizations online, a process that pushed participants to explore the new opportunities digital technologies offered. The question of how that body of water is labeled in various international contexts has consistently raised the passions of resident and Diaspora Iranians no matter where they fall on the political spectrum. Online responses to the Persian Gulf issue date to the 1990s. An early instance of Internet-enabled transnational collaboration among Iranians unfolded in 1996 on the pages of the Web site The Iranian (or Iranian.com, as it also came to be called). Following the case study of the Persian Gulf issue, the chapter traces the genesis of new modes of political action and cultural production that emerged alongside the rapid development of new technologies, from the static pages of the early Internet to the participatory spaces of Web 2.0. It shows that while digital media may make new forms of collective action possible, they are also conducive to the reemergence and cultivation of exclusionary ideologies, particularly those pertaining to nationalism and national identity that thrive on gendered and racialized constructions.

Internet-enabled activism around the Persian Gulf also provides a lens for examining how state actors became visible participants on the Iranian Internet. The chapter shows how government entities and officials eagerly entered the fray, promoting the production of particular kinds of content online and in some cases even co-opting oppositional Internet-based movements. Instances of Persian Gulf activism, particularly the participation of the state, also draw attention to important features of the Iranian Internet. New technologies may be used to both open new spaces for activism and magnify steps taken offline, thus giving an advantage to those who have the capacity to mobilize in multiple spaces. Governments and their institutions, which have access to resources that include other forms of media, are well placed to use new media to enhance their power, a fact that is often unnoticed in assessments of the Internet as a vehicle for challenging state power.

Against this backdrop of the early and transitional years of the Web, Chapter 2, “Uncharted Blogospheres,” focuses attention on the
heyday of the Iranian blogosphere, which roughly spans from 2003 to 2008. Weblogistan, as it is known to Iranian users, is among the most celebrated and written-about aspects of the Iranian Internet. Both popular and academic accounts have made a convincing case that the Iranian blogosphere is well suited for expressing dissent, for challenging the power structure’s favored interpretations of past and present events, and for finding alternate routes of disseminating information. Yet despite its prevalence as a favorite topic, large segments of Weblogistan remain unexamined.

The chapter provides a supplement to existing narratives about Weblogistan from two complementary angles. First, it examines examples from distinct but overlapping categories of blogs that are often either entirely overlooked or only briefly considered in the dominant literature about Weblogistan. These blogs belie a number of misconceptions about Iran and the blogosphere and reflect serious fissures in Iranian society and the political structure. Although they may not present issues from the secular or oppositional perspectives favored by many journalistic accounts of Weblogistan produced outside Iran, the bloggers under consideration do not shrink from using the medium in ways that challenge social and political mores. Second, this chapter considers a number of state-sponsored actions aimed at shaping Weblogistan. The available material on the Iranian blogosphere, particularly reports produced by human rights and nongovernmental organizations, has documented the Iranian government’s repressive policies toward the blogosphere such as filtering content, blocking access, and in some cases arresting bloggers. These actions show the ruling system’s recognition of the serious challenges Weblogistan may pose. The state-sponsored actions examined in this chapter—including attempts to shape discourses on and about Weblogistan—reveal that it also appreciates the potential of the blogosphere for promoting its own cultural and political agendas.

Chapter 3, “The Movable Image,” introduces a new line of inquiry into the intersection of moving image cultures and the Iranian Internet in the years 2004–2010. It focuses on material pertaining to the eight-year war with Iraq, a conflict that continues to have resonance in contemporary Iran and that has engendered a vast and expanding body of cultural products. An emerging body of literature has begun
to consider the place of war-related books, posters, murals, and films to the contested processes of defining the Iranian state, Iranian society, and Iranian citizenship. The digital versions of these materials and how they function online, however, have yet to be critically examined. In fact, audiovisual materials on the Iranian Internet in general have not been thoroughly examined. Exceptions include accounts of how activists used digital technologies to capture and circulate audiovisual materials during the protests following the elections of 2009. It is noteworthy that even the moving images produced about the 2009 protests used state-sanctioned tropes of the Iran-Iraq war. This chapter argues that the often-curious manifestations of audiovisual cultural products about the war have been both productive and disruptive for state powers, individuals, and/or organizations with an interest in contemporary uses of the Iran-Iraq war.

Chapter 3 begins with an overview of mostly state-endorsed cultural products about the Iran-Iraq war, focusing on material produced and/or recirculated from 2004 through 2010. In the first years of this period, resources and a certain level of skill were necessary to digitize, upload, and host audiovisual content. This gave the state and institutions affiliated with it an advantage over individual and independent users. This picture significantly changed with the advent of free and global platforms for distributing moving images. The chapter considers state-endorsed uses of offline and virtual content about the war, then the recirculation and repurposing (in part or in full) of these materials on the global platform provided by YouTube. The rise of free video-sharing services has resulted in fascinating examples of how content has been remixed and then debated. Examples range from the incorporation of war materials for seemingly irrelevant causes outside Iran to the recasting of audiovisual content about the Iran-Iraq war to challenge the ruling establishment in Iran. Many of the consequences of the development of YouTube may be explained in terms of its features, especially its social networking elements. Discussions of such features set the foundation for an in-depth examination of social media in chapter 4.

By late 2007, the sheen of blogs and blogging was beginning to dull on the Iranian Internet, and social networking sites were showing signs of becoming more popular among resident and Diaspora Iranians. The migration to social media and the implications of this shift
are most evident in relation to Internet content about the disputed 2009 presidential election. Protesters’ much-touted uses of social media in the aftermath of the disputed election remain a hallmark example of how these platforms can successfully attract transnational attention and support. Yet the focus on this event has overshadowed the significance of social media in earlier periods. Similar to accounts of past periods of the Iranian Internet, most accounts of social media have limited their assessment of state actors to their repressive activities. While social media created important moments on the Iranian Internet, an assessment of their impact requires us to move beyond their functions during the post-election period.

Chapter 4, “Social Media and the Message,” covers the rise of social media in Iran and its dominance on the Iranian Internet from 2006 through 2012. It begins with an overview of the ascendancy of social media, pinpointing factors and debates that had an impact on how social media is used in Iran. The chapter examines two key moments in the surge of social media, both of which illustrate innovative uses of digital media and indicate its pitfalls. The first covers the presidential campaign period of 2009, a time when social media seemed to promise much but a time that was overshadowed by the aftermath of the election. I examine the use of the wildly popular—but mostly ignored—aggregate Web site Friendfeed in the campaign period, highlighting the ways that the service enabled new modes of media practice, social and political exchange, and, for fleeting moments, the emergence of near-ideal public spheres. I then move to a consideration of the post-election era, with a specific focus on the state’s responses to the changed realities of the country and the digital spaces to which Iran is linked. In this period, widespread resources were openly allocated to explicitly formulate and implement a systematic approach to the new media landscape under the banner of responding to what the state calls a soft war. The chapter considers the implications of this new phase of the state’s complicated relationship to media and cultural products.

The conclusion, “New Media Futures,” looks back at the rich but disputed territories of the Iranian Internet. Given the volatility of Iranian and regional politics in the nearly twenty years since the popularization of the Internet, the stakes of knowledge production about
Iran are high. Assessing the Iranian Internet with a framework that captures its contradictions and complexities is crucial in any attempt to understand the consequences of new media technologies for Iranian politics, culture, and society. This includes taking seriously state actors’ active uses of digital media for the purposes of cultural production and expansion of state power. If the Iranian Internet that is revealed in this book has its troubling sides, it also contains many laudable manifestations of translocal and transnational exchange, collaboration, and creative action. The book concludes on the positive note of advocating that we view the Iranian Internet through a wider lens while taking lessons from both its faults and its realized potential.