

## REVIEW ESSAY

### Media in Iran from the 1979 Revolution to the Present

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**ALI MOHAMMADI AND ANNABELLE SREBERNY-MOHAMMADI.** *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution.* University of Minnesota Press, 1994. 256 pages. Paperback US\$25.50 ISBN 0816622175.

**NEGAR MOTTAHEDEH.** *#iranelection: Hashtag Solidarity and the Transformation of Online Life.* Stanford University Press, Briefs, 2015. 152 pages. Paperback US\$12.99 ISBN 978-0804795876.

**ANNABELLE SREBERNY and MASSOUMEH TORFEH, EDS.** *Cultural Revolution in Iran: Contemporary Popular Culture in the Islamic Republic.* London: I.B. Taurus, 2013. 287 pages. Cloth US \$90 ISBN 9781780760896.

**ANNABELLE SREBERNY AND GHOLAM KHIABANY.** *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran.* I.B. Taurus, 2010. 240 Pages. Paperback US\$29.00 ISBN 1845116070.

**M**edia studies in post-revolutionary Iran and the Iranian diaspora offer a lot to the broader study of media in the Middle East, anthropology of media, and the emerging field of production studies. This essay takes the opportunity to review several recent books in light of a classic work on Iranian media to consider the trajectory of Iranian media studies since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. As these works attest, recent Iranian history provides scholars excellent material to rethink models of state-centered media, revolutionary propaganda, and the popular use and state surveillance of digital technologies, as well as generational shifts in media consumption.

In a foundational book, *Small Media, Big Revolution* (Mohammadi and Sreberny-Mohammadi 1994), the authors studied the “small media” practices of the revolutionary moment. Juxtaposing these with the “big” state broadcasting services of the Shah, Mohammadi and Sreberny-Mohammadi argued that cassettes, open letters, and leaflets produced during the 1979 Iranian revolution created a more coherent and viable “virtual space” of Andersonian “imagined community.” More specifically, the authors argued that cassette tapes and leaflets permitted debate and, importantly, helped circulate ideas about change among vast sectors of both the literate and non-literate population. *Small Media, Big Revolution* remains the classic study of the Iranian clergy’s use of cassette tapes to spread the message of Ayatollah Khomeini, then in exile in France, to strengthen their mosque-based network and ultimately to outflank the plethora of other groups participating in the revolution. The authors’ attention to “small media” practices not only drew attention to a non-Western media context, it also focused on the ground level rather than state circulation of media. This book set the stage for a broader view of Iranian media, in which scholars would pay attention to the myriad ways in which citizens carve out spaces that the state-controlled media outlets of the Islamic Republic aim to foreclose.

To be sure, “big media” practices of the Pahlavi era continued in Iran after the revolution, but were used to “Islamize” society. Ayatollah Khomeini, in particular, advanced the notion that Western media’s influence on Iran acted as a dangerous “injection” (*tazriq*) of Western values. This line of thinking in regards to the effects of media on audiences, which directly echoed the hypodermic theory of media and Frankfurt School critiques of the culture industry, has remained the dominant outlook of the political elite in the Islamic Republic. As three new and recent books demonstrate, however, Iranian post-revolutionary media is far from monolithic or purely Islamized. In fact, Iran produces a diverse and vital mediascape today: Iran’s music, film, theater, and cinema cultures constantly push the boundaries of what is permitted by the state; Persian is one of the most widely used languages on the Internet, and Iran and the diaspora have been primary sites of a booming blogosphere. With the Green Movement in 2009, Iranian activists were among the first to organize massive protests against the state and draw global support via social media.

*Cultural Revolution in Iran: Contemporary Popular Culture in the Islamic Republic* (Sreberny and Torfeh 2013), is an important addition, highlighting the wide array of often neglected popular media practices, including chapters on contemporary theater (Anjo), dance (Mozafari), music (Robertson and Siamdust), video games (Sisler), text message jokes (Samimi), and masculinity

(Honarbin-Halliday). These chapters, in particular, offer a fresh take on cultural production in Iran, and are the most ethnographically grounded chapters with fieldwork in Iran. The Liliane Anjo's chapter, "Contemporary Iranian Theater," is an important contribution as theater production in the country has skyrocketed in the past decade, yet there remains little academic study of this phenomenon. Bronwen Robertson's chapter on unofficial rock music in Iran makes important interventions in the often repeated but erroneous interest in "underground" music in Iran. She instead offers an analysis of why this framework does not capture the complexity of rock music production in Iran: "'underground' unnecessarily overpoliticises the genre and this overpoliticisation works strongly against these musicians who are struggling to gain acceptance and a public platform within Iran through which to disseminate their work" (139). Vit Sisler's chapter, "Digital Hero," on video games in Iran, like his other work, helps address this understudied media practice; that chapter aligns well with the chapter by Honarbin-Holliday, who explores issues of masculinity, another area of study that needs more attention in contemporary Iran. Naghmeh Samimi's chapter, "Gendered Taboos in Iran's Text Message Jokes," offers one of the few studies of the importance of cell phone usage in Iran, which is ubiquitous in the country due to the lowering of prices in the last few years. Other chapters from the book include topics such as youth culture (Mahdavi and Arghavan), women's rights and women's cultural production (Kian, Zeydabadi-Nejad, Vanzan), public murals (Bombardier), satire (Follmer), and diaspora (Moghadam).

The volume's breadth offers a comprehensive take on the most recent forms of cultural production. However, given the short length of the chapters, it does not offer as much depth as one would hope. The book also remains almost exclusively Tehran focused. Although Tehran is the cultural capital of the country, the other urban centers of the country, such as Isfahan, Shiraz, Tabriz, Mashad, and increasingly Karaj, are important sites to add to a volume such as this in answering lingering questions, including: In what ways do popular media production, circulation, and consumption differ in other cities and towns in the country? Are these media practices consumed differently across the country?

The use of digital media in Iran and its diaspora has received more attention than the topics discussed in the volume above, but none in a more comprehensive and succinct way than *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran* by Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany. Focusing on the 2000s, a period of rapid expansion in Iranian telecommunications, *Blogistan* shows us that, despite state controls on media technologies, and aggressive censorship and

surveillance strategies, Iran was home to a thriving blog culture. Although the Internet, and, especially, high-speed Internet, was still a relatively expensive commodity in Iran, middle-class urbanized youth blogged, as did members of the clergy, the paramilitary *Basij*, and the Revolutionary Guard. Men blogged, as did large numbers of women, from all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. *Blogistan* is an important intervention in studies of the Internet on a global scale, and helped explain the plethora of blogs in Iran and its diaspora. Despite this, the authors miss some opportunities to provide ethnographic detail. Specifically, readers would benefit from understanding the social world of these blogs beyond the computer screen: Given the strict ways in which the Iranian regime conducts its surveillance of online spaces, what is the relationship of the blogs, the bloggers, and the readers offline?

With the emergence of the Green Movement in 2009, bloggers were heavily imprisoned and the popular form of communicating on the Internet turned more towards social media. In *#iranelection: Hashtag Solidarity and the Transformation of Online Life* (2015), Negar Mottahedeh not only explores the rise of the Green Movement in Iran and the ways that it was enacted online, but crucially, she tracks the rise of the hashtag as a tool and language in online organizing. The hashtag *#iranelection* transformed the way many use Twitter and social media, and Mottahedeh's groundbreaking study shows how this hashtag transformed the way that users around the world engage with social media. Though the first flush of overwrought enthusiasm for social media is long past, there is consensus that Facebook, Twitter, and other Web 2.0 applications, particularly on handheld devices, have been effective organizing tools against the slower-moving security apparatuses of authoritarian states. The new technology has also helped social movements tell their story to the outside world, unhindered by official news blackouts, unbothered by state censors, and unfiltered by traditional Western media.

The book, *#iranelection*, is not only about what was happening in Iran during the Green Movement, but importantly, it points to the ways in which it began to signal a way that social media users could create an archive of global political violations. This book is, in effect, a history of hashtags in social movements and illustrates how this worldwide movement began with *#iranelection*. Mottahedeh argues that the importance of the hashtag points to how "amorphous, flexible, and remotely networked, these creative, collective, and disorderly formations of solidarity unravel both the classical and the neoliberal organizations of power and privilege ..." (104). For her, the hashtag creates an ephemeral solidarity that she argues "is symptomatic of a melancholic failure to reclaim as our own the most fundamental loss, a loss

that if recognized would effectively transform all of us. The loss, to name it, is that of true kinship—of an encompassing human solidarity” (104).

These four books offer an umbrella to understand media production and cultural practices in Iran since the 1979 revolution. They provide scholars of media and scholars of Iran important insights into the production, circulation, and consumption of media in Iran and its diaspora. Read together, they provide an understanding of the Iranian media sphere, and the politics of media in the broader region. Nonetheless, there remains much to explore when it comes to media and the Internet in Iran, including the Iranian national television and radio production and consumption; questions about the role of the state in limiting internet access; the creation of a National Intranet in order to restrict the flow of information; and, the latest development of cyberwarfare and Iran’s cyber army. With increased reports of cyberwar between the United States, Israel, and Iran, as well the creation of an Iranian cyber army as part of the paramilitary Basij organization, this area is one that is ripe for scholarly attention, as it can be juxtaposed with work on celebrated hacktivists such as Anonymous (Coleman 2011).

## Works Cited

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