David M. Faris and Babak Rami (eds.): "Social Media in Iran. Politics and Society after 2009"

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Book Reviewed
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The edited volume contains fourteen contributions from various disciplines and covers the complex questions of whether, and under which circumstances, social media can promote democratization. The contributions are divided into the sections "Societal," "Politics," and "Culture." In Iran, the internet can contribute to undermining the authoritarian elite, but at the same time, censorship is strong and prevents online organization. The introduction offers a promising conceptualization of the ambivalence inherent in the use of social media, namely the potential to offer alternative spaces while simultaneously contributing to or reproducing inequalities. As Faris and Rahimi rightly remark, the internet is not an equal space and voices are amplified in different ways. It is a space stratified by age, gender, income, etc., much like the 'real' world.

However, regarding Iran, misconceptions and generalizations, which depict the political landscape as a closed system flowing from top to bottom, are widespread. In Western media and in popular and academic writing, the internet in Iran tends to be romanticized as a venue for rebellion, democratization, and subversion. This also occurred, in particular, during and after the presidential elections in 2009, a topic many of the contributions explore.

The theoretical framework covers the role of social media in mobilizing collective action in authoritarian societies. For example, it has been shown that individuals are more likely to act if large numbers of others within their networks do so as well. Trust and social capital have thus been found to be crucial elements in the use of social media.

The dominance that Western discourses also tend to exert in online spaces—as some contributions show—, needs to be carefully analyzed in order to avoid reproducing dichotomies between the 'West' and 'Islam,' or between freedom and oppression. It is important in studies about societies such as Iran, who has a conflicting history with Western intervention and who therefore has been trying to autonomously shape its identity, to take into account these power imbalances and the articulations that formed in reaction to them.

This latter aspect is well explored in chapter three on gay Iranians. The author is critical of the marginalizing effects of western definitions and identities: "Social media have disciplined the manner in which gay individuals interact with each other and have produced gay bodies that look no different from Western gay individuals"(65). At the same time, it points to the internet as a source of information and

exchange that would otherwise not be available.

Chapter four on disabled Iranians shows that there is little awareness about disability rights and great self-consciousness even among the communities themselves. Discrimination is–if not promoted–at least reproduced in online forums.

Other chapters, however, are much less differentiated in their regard to the ambivalence of online spaces. For example, chapter two on gender roles offers some questionable dichotomies between 'women' and 'clerics' and draws a rather simplistic conclusion that discourses and practices, which resort from Western lifestyle influences, are presented per se as a challenge to gender roles in Iran (49).

The chapters covering online journalism and blogs describe them as additions to a fractured political landscape. The role of *Facebook*, for example, in the presidential elections of 2009 is said to have had displacing properties for established arrangements of power. On the one hand, it reinforced social relations that were less established but *Facebook* simultaneously undermined the cohesion of the Green Movement.

Similarly, the social media site *Balatarin* was founded by an idealistic desire to create a dynamic Iranian public sphere and to bridge differences among various segments of the society. But, over time, the site became a reflection of the polarization of the online community because gatekeepers censored and dismissed views that were not in favor of a particular strand of the Green Movement. This chapter by Babak Rahimi and Nima Rassooli is an insightful description of the struggles within grassroots movements in Iran. Instead of idealizing the social media users as promoters of democracy against the regime, it carefully points out the difficulties in maintaining pluralism and diverging views in a 'short-term society.'

> This latter term was coined by Homa Katouzian (1998) to describe how "Long-term development of society, in the form of progress toward collective prosperity, has been neglected in all societal and governmental facets […] because social actors in the Iranian context pursue short-term interests as they become increasingly dependent on the whims of the state" (194).

Another chapter describes the formation of online political memory with the example of 'Neda,' a female protester who was shot during the peaceful demonstrations after the presidential election in 2009. The author argues that forms of re-memorialization in social media shifted the fabric of political memory and cultural identity. Chapter thirteen on Iranian cinema is quite specialized and does blend with the book's other discussions about social media's potential to transform authoritarianism. The last chapter by Staci Gem Sheiwiller about Iranian avant-garde video art provides the reader with a very clear overview of the scene itself and details the possibilities and restrictions of online activism.

In conclusion, the volume offers some important nuances regarding the question: In which particular setting does the internet contribute to democratization and under which circumstances does it undermine plurality and mobilization? However, some of the chapters remain overly descriptive. The theoretical framework regarding social, political, and cultural contexts in Iran is a bit thin, making generalizations beyond this specific Iranian case difficult. In particular, one would like to know more about what the status quo of social media usage in Iran really is (i.e. not only selected venues such as *Facebook*). How has it shaped ideas and practices of civil society vis-a-vis the state? What do we know about public and private discourses in Iran that contribute to democratization and/or authoritarianism? Finally, how can we conceptualize social change in Iran apart from dichotomies

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such as 'Western' and 'Islamic' or even 'religious' and 'secular'?
Many chapters briefly repeat the history of the internet and blogging in Iran, but an overarching conclusion about the questions posed in the introduction is missing. For edited volumes with chapters not as tightly knitted, a conclusion, in which the different aspects touched upon are brought together and discussed in a more abstract sense, would be especially helpful.
Nevertheless, for scholars interested in Iran or in the use of social media in authoritarian societies, the book does offer a plethora of new insights.

Works Cited

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