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A Vital Role for Electronic Publishing

Azar Mahloujian (Librarian)

In the introduction to this 100-Day Dialogue, we posed questions about the current crisis in publishing. These questions -- in fact, the entire premise of our current discussion -- applies largely to publishers in the United States, Europe and Japan. A subsequent article, written by Lin Chenglin of the China Book Business Report, offered a different perspective for our readers. Faced with the largest undeveloped publishing market in the world, China's publishers envision opportunity, not crisis.

Last year, Azar Mahloujian, an Iranian living in Europe, contacted us about writing for our online journal. We asked for a report about the current state of electronic publishing in her native country. Like Lin Chenglin's article, the following piece represents a departure from most contributions to this dialogue. The introduction of the Gutenberg printing press liberated people from the tyranny of the churches and monarchies of the world. This was once a critical function for publishing. In Iran, it still is -- and electronic publishing is leading the way.

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One cannot talk about electronic publishing -- or any other kind of publishing -- in Iran without mentioning the current political and social climate. When it emerged from the revolution of 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran declared itself free from the influence of both the capitalist corruption of the West and the communist corruption of the East. Cutting itself off from the world, Iran would go its own way, back to the fundamentals of Islam. Today, however, after two decades of isolation from the world community, there are many indications that Iranians want to live in a modern society, a society not dominated by religious fundamentalism and political dictatorship. In line with this, many of the barriers that, hitherto, have prevented Iran from participating in the life of the outside world are breaking down.

The Internet is a big part of the opening up of Iran. For foreign journalists now in Iran, one popular topic is the opening of Internet cafes during the past few years. In the cities, and even in many small towns, young people go to these cafes to surf the Internet and -- not incidentally, given the enforced separation of the sexes -- to meet friends.

Most of Iran's universities are connected to the Internet, for the government encourages the use of computers for economic and scientific advancement. So even though the majority of Iranians cannot afford a dial-up Internet service, most families with a child attending university have access to the Web -- which is then frequently shared with friends, too.

The influence of computers and the Internet is not restricted to the young and the liberal-minded. It includes many of those previously hostile to the West and to the use of modern technologies. At the holy city of Qom, the ayatollahs at the Qom Computer Center proudly tell foreign journalists of their CD-ROM version of the Koran and of the Persian translation that went up on the Internet three years ago.

Although we are now seeing the beginnings of electronic publishing in Iran, the availability for ordinary readers of e-books or print-on-demand is still far off. For now, such technology is too advanced and too expensive for general readers. There are some books available on CD-ROM. But more importantly, newspapers, including most "reformist" newspapers, are available on the Internet.

Today, after years of political apathy, a new wave of protest is sweeping the country. At the same time that many Iranians are fighting for freedom and individual rights, the country's conservative forces are going to great lengths to retain power. After the victories of reformist candidates in the April 2000 elections, the conservatives, who control the courts, launched a massive campaign to paralyze parliamentary reform. Shortly thereafter, they succeeded in closing down newspapers associated with the reformist movement. At present, some 40 newspapers and journals are banned under such charges as "provocation of public disorder" or "insulting Islam." Because of the government's practice of detaining journalists, the international organization Reporters Sans Frontieres wrote a letter of protest to the head of the Iranian judiciary, calling Iran "the largest prison for journalists in the Middle East."

Electronic Publishing and the Reform Movement

Censorship has long been an essential to political regimes in keeping the population silent and unaware. But in the Internet era, the effectiveness of this tool is diminished. Iran's students are children of the revolution, and half the country's population of 65 million is under the age of 25. Yet in spite of all the propaganda and brainwashing they have received, they are now striving for a democratic society. In the Internet they have found an ally, one that crosses the traditional boundaries between West and East or North and South.

The Student Movement Coordination Committee for Democracy in Iran (SMCCDI) has created a Website, on which it publishes a newsletter, information about campaigns and actions, a daily news service, photographs, discussions, faxes from within Iran, articles by banned journalists, and other material of this nature. One example of the site's effectiveness occurred in the summer of 1999, when security forces savagely attacked a student dormitory at Tehran University. The students' "crime" was their peaceful demonstration against the lack of freedom of expression and, specifically, the closing of the liberal newspaper *Salam*. A series of photographs documenting the raid was immediately posted on the Website. Pictures of bloody faces, damaged furniture, and broken windows exposed the event to the whole world and prevented the authorities from denying it. Iranian state television, though controlled by the conservatives, was forced to show these same pictures, thus shocking the whole nation and bringing sympathy to the students and their cause.

Although the technology being used is new, there is nothing new about Iranians using currently available technologies to bring political change. Indeed, the revolution of 1979 is sometimes referred to as "the world's first cassette revolution," because of the role played by the cassette recordings of the speeches of the revolution's leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. Living in exile in France, Khomeini's fiery messages reached his supporters in Iran on cassettes, which were smuggled into the country. Just a single tape could then be copied and heard by millions. Now, 20 years later, another ayatollah is using today's digital technology to challenge the very state brought by Khomeini's revolution.

Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, who was once in line to become the nation's Supreme Leader, fell out of favor in 1988. Since then, his outspoken support of reform has led to his being put under frequent house arrest, continuously so since 1997. Last year, a Website was created for the 78-year-old priest. Like the SMCCDI site, Montazeri's site must, for reasons of security and practicality, operate from outside Iran. The site enables Montazeri to communicate with visitors to the site, from both within and from outside the country. In online articles and interviews, visitors to the site can read his views on religious and political issues. In addition, a 600-page memoir of Montazeri's life (which

would surely have been censored had it appeared in print) is now available for online reading or to be downloaded.

The memoirs contain facts never before published, which reveal the collaborative role of state and religious authorities in the assassinations of political opponents. The government found the release of this information intolerable, and in December 2000, one of Montazeri's sons, Said, who had helped his father with the site, was arrested. Soon after, persons unknown opened a site in Montazeri's name -- but with the spelling slightly changed, to Montazery. While presenting itself as Montazeri's site, this new site presents the views of his opponent, the present Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Although the new site caused some initial confusion, most visitors now are quick to catch on and they go on to search for the genuine site. But it is now clear that the online world is not exempt from the battle between Iran's forces of conservatism and reform.

But even in Iran, the Internet is not all about politics. Many Websites operated by Iranians feature poetry or music. Most of these, however, belong to Iranians in exile. One notable exception is the site of Iran's most popular recent poet Ahmad Shamlu, who died in July 2000. Shamlu.ouriran.com was created by his friends in Canada, and it contains the poet's work in the original Persian, as well as in translation. One can also purchase print copies of Shamlu's books.

In "Censored Book, Internet Bestseller," the Chilean writer Ignacio Iniguez Aravena writes of how, "thanks to the Internet," a book censored by the Chilean authorities became widely read. In the case of China, we remember how the student movement at Tiananmen Square used the fax to send out its cry for freedom, and we can foresee that, with 20 million Chinese users, the Internet will become an instrument for opening up that country's social and political climate.

People with access to the Internet cannot be kept isolated. The case of Iran demonstrates again that electronic publishing has a vital part to play in the fight for democracy. In the Western world, these new methods of publishing are seen as a way the book business can free itself from the dominance of the bestseller mentality or as a means of facilitating contact between writers and readers. But in countries like Iran, where freedom of expression is not a given, electronic publishing is a means of publishing literature that is, for political reasons, unpublishable. In short, it has taken on a new role: to combat censorship.

Related sites

[The Student Movement Coordination Committee for Democracy in Iran](#)

[\(SMCCDI\) \(English\)](#)

[Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri Website \(Farsi\)](#)

[Official Site of Ahmad Shamulu \(English and Farsi\)](#)

[Reporters sans frontieres \(English, French and Spanish\)](#)

Related articles

[Censored Book, Internet Bestseller \(July 1999\)](#)

Profile

Azar Mahloujian is a writer and librarian. She comes originally from Iran and lives in exile in Sweden. She has worked as a librarian in both countries.

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