

Master's Thesis, 10 Study Units
Stockholm School of Economics
Department of Management and Organization

Iranian Youth and the Internet

– Six Voices on Internet Use beyond the Public and Private Spheres –

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Presented on October 10, 2006
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Acknowledgements

We would like to express our immense gratitude to all the people who have supported us during this process. First of all a warm thanks to our interviewees, who with their participation have made this thesis possible. They showed us their great courage as they participated even though they were aware of that there was an implied risk of being interviewed.

We would also like to thank our families and friends who have supported us during this process, who have encouraged us and believed in our success. I, Susanne, would like to direct a special thanks to my loved ones, for your patience. I, Markus, would like to thank my family and friends who have supported and inspired me and I also would like to dedicate a very special thought of gratitude to my mother who, among others, supported me during these years of studies, but unlike the rest of us, could not share this joy with me.

Finally we would like to express our sincere thankfulness to our tutor Magnus Mähring at Stockholm School of Economics for his enormous patience and inspiration including very valuable comments and feedback. We are truly grateful for your encouraging and supportive assistance during this process. Magnus – thank you so much!

Susanne Najafi & Markus Nyblom

Stockholm School of Economics, 23rd of September, 2006.

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Disclaimer

With this thesis there is NO intention to make any political statement or criticizing the Iranian government. What is reflected is the interviewees' personal opinions and not the personal opinions of the authors.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 Iran is ruled by a theocratic regime. Information about the outside world is controlled and a non-Islamic way of life is prohibited in public Iran. However mediums of communication like the Internet are crossing borders and hence reaching from the outside to the inside of the Iranian society to a greater extent than any other medium ever has. Nevertheless, the Internet also allows a one-, as well as a two-way communication within the national borders. Hence, the Iranians can avoid the hindrance set by the regime to freely access to information about the outside world, and in addition communicate under cover, which enables the flow and generation of public opinion. The Internet is acknowledged as one of the most effective tools of communication in modern times and it is also considered as an empowering tool for globalization.¹

In a country like Iran, where there are conflicts between countercultures and where there are clashes between different paradigms, mobilization around meaning is fundamental. Cultural movements and changes of paradigms are built around communication systems as they are the main way in which these movements can reach out to people who possibly would adhere to the specific values addressed.² The control of the communication systems is hence crucial, since they make it possible to influence the “consciousness” of the whole society. This is why we consider the Internet to be such a fundamental tool of change in Iran and in this paper we want to investigate how the Internet can affect the Iranian society. We will investigate this through the eyes of the Iranian youth as they historically have been the main cultural, economical and political force of change within the Iranian society.³

¹ Thomas (2004) in: Bailys & Smith

² Castells (2001)

³ Seyed & Mousavi (2003)

1.1. Purpose

Our purpose is to explore how Iranian youth use the Internet and how their perception of society is influenced as a result of Internet use. We want to reach our purpose by studying Internet use in Iran through the perspective of six Iranian youth.

We intend to illuminate the chosen subject, by using different theories and explain how Iranian youth is affected by the use of Internet. We do not want to find a universal, generally applicable theory but our goal is to lift the described case of Internet use to a higher level of analysis and abstraction. In our purpose there is an ambition to find a model hence we will not enter into detailed levels of Internet use but focus on patterns of use. The thesis might provide indications on effects of Internet use in Iran on the Iranian society and also indicate whether the Internet is a new forum for new forms of expression and identity.

1.2. Delimitations

We have chosen an explorative question, since we are interested in analyzing our problem from how things are, rather than how things ought to be. Trying to describe reality is of course always a difficult task and we are aware that we will not find objective truths, which is a delimitation but not our aim.

We have decided to divide the definition of the Iranian society in two parts with the help of Habermas theories of the public and the private sphere. We have combined the theory of spheres by Habermas and the primary data from the Iranian youth's perceptions of the Internet and the Iranian society. We are aware that it is difficult to describe a phenomenon as the respondents' perception of their surrounding is not the same as our interpretation of the interviewees responses. According to a social constructivist view this is a delimitation affecting how we interpret our findings from our respondents.

Our study, in terms of data collection, is limited until and including the year of 2004. Analysis work has been done continuously.

1.3. Description of the authors' choice of subject

The Internet is a fairly new phenomenon in contemporary history, and although theories are scarce, the focus of interest is strong and the phenomenon draws the attention of people from many different sciences, societies and cultures. One of the most distinguishing attributes about the Internet is its interdisciplinary feature, bringing together fields of science and the strength of their importance to one another. The interest for the subject of this paper grew when the authors got familiar with the theories within Information Management. We were struck by the power of the Internet and we started to reflect on the Internet's influence on societies where the inflow and outflow of information is restricted, hence we got interested in studying the Internet's influence on the Iranian youth. As historically young people and mainly students have been the enforcers of change in Iran we thought it would be interesting to get their perspectives on change in the Iranian society and the Internet's role in this change. Moreover we decided to explore the opportunity that this uninvestigated field of research provides.

2. Methodology

In the following chapter we will explain how the data for our study have been obtained, how the data has been processed, what choices of methodology has been chosen and why these choices have been made. The quality of the study will be evaluated according to the literature within the field.

2.1. An Explorative Social Constructivist approach

Knowledge on the chosen topic is scarce and the topic is difficult to investigate as there is little research done, hence our study can be labelled as explorative. We have chosen a social constructivist approach which is based on subjectivity and where the perception of the society and its context is created in the moment of individual interpretation. However, even though every individual creates his or her own truth, individuals can agree on

common truths through inter-subjectivity.⁴ Hence, we have chosen in this paper, not to see facts as exogenously given, but to rather explore the respondents' perceptions of how they believe things are. Given the response attained from the respondents we have made our own interpretation out of that.

2.2. Empirics and Theory

In this chapter we would like to clarify our mode of procedure when it comes to the relationship between empirics and theory. This choice affects the way of approaching the empirics, the data collection and the theoretical framework of the study.

Deduction, is when the hypothesis of a study is seen as already given and when the author's task is to verify the truth or falseness of that hypothesis. Induction on the other hand, is about having the point of departure for the study in observations and from them try to make general conclusions. In this case it is important to be humble and admit that everything true might not be found.⁵

Our aim has been to have a inductive approach, admitting a social constructionist approach have shaped our interpretations and the conclusions that are derived. However, by admitting this and being aware of it, we have tried to externalize our thoughts in the process of conducting this study.

2.3. Qualitative Methodology

As stated above, our approach is social constructivist. We therefore aim to look at the perceptions of the interviewees and what power that has to imply changes. Our empirical findings will be divided in two parts where the first part is based on secondary data and consists of systematic information gathering. In the second part of our empirical findings, the primary data, we will use a qualitative methodology as our main source of data collection. The qualitative method should be used when there is a need of penetrating a

⁴ Jackson and Carter (2000)

⁵ Holme & Krohn Solvang (2001)

given problem to answer questions like how and why.⁶ The qualitative methodology is characterized by focusing on open-ended questions where the empirics are ambiguous and where the main purpose is to understand the subjective perspective of the interviewee.

2.4. Primary data

Our way of collecting primary data is through interviews. These interviews are semi-standardized where most of the questions are set beforehand but where there is also space for new questions and viewpoints to arise during the interview sessions.

It is common to separate between structured and non-structured interviews. Standardized interviews are always structured while non-standardized interviews can be either structured or not.⁷ The interviews of this study can be characterized as semi-structured, and they were analysed according to a template.

The interviews can also be considered as semi-constructed as we used specific questions targeted at acquiring information about the respondent's opinions, values and attitudes. This was done with the purpose of being able to read between the lines, to analyze what may not have been put into words during the interview session.⁸

2.4.1. Method of selection of interviewees

The selection of the interviewees is the following; our first group of interviewees are Iranian immigrants recently arrived to Sweden (2 interviews). Our second group of interviewees is Iranian citizens living in Iran (4 interviewees). We think this will give us a picture of the problem, allowing us to see discrepancies of interest⁹, by hearing viewpoints also from those who have lived in both societies; Iran and Sweden.

⁶ Eriksson & Wiedersheim-Paul (2001)

⁷ Lundahl & Skärvad (1992)

⁸ Lundahl & Skärvad (1992)

⁹ Holme & Krohn Solvang (1997)

The interview subjects or respondents were chosen by us asking randomly young people in Iran with whom we had connections through second or third parties i.e. a friend who asked a friend on our behalf. By doing so, we aimed to decrease what we called “bias of familiarity”. The questions that we asked the interviewees can be found in Appendix 1.

2.4.2. Method of analysis and reporting

Hereby we are going to present how we reported data and how the analysis of the data was made. While conducting the interviews, we took notes. Three interviews were conducted by Susanne in Persian, as the respondents couldn’t speak any other language. Furthermore, four interviewees were living in Iran and that is where the interviews were conducted, while two had recently arrived to Sweden and hence interviewed in Sweden.

We conducted semi-structured interviews where we had several theme questions and where we needed a better understanding or where the respondents had interesting view points, we posed follow-up questions (see Appendix 1). From our notes we collected all the answers into one document as a base for our analysis. While analyzing we compared the answers per theme always trying to keep to what the respondent said by giving quotes in order to let the respondents’ opinions come alive. In order to protect our interviewees, we have used pseudonyms as we have changed their names and living conditions.

As a source of inspiration for our discussion we have also interviewed Mr. Enric Colet who is Assistant Professor of Information Management at ESADE, Barcelona, Spain. He contributed with interesting perspectives on Internet’s impact on democracy processes and how Internet could provide with change in a country like Iran. Where applicable we have chosen to also include two voices of Iranian bloggers to give perspective and comment certain themes.

2.5. Secondary data

Background information was collected about Iran to create a solid basis for our analysis and mirrored to our findings . The problem studied was initially identified by reading articles, interviews and magazines. Throughout the process of writing this essay a constant check-up of new information was made, as the investigated field is very dynamic.

2.6. Quality of the study

It can be considered as a problem to conduct a qualitative interview in exactly the same way twice since the authors can interpret the responses differently and their opinions can have changed since the last time they conducted the previous interview. To increase the likelihood to be able to conduct a similar reliable study again it is important to clearly describe the procedure which was used, which we have done in the section about the primary and secondary data.

It's is neither possible nor desirable¹⁰ to have an objective approach to our study as we are using a social constructivist approach. What is desirable is that the researcher has an increased self-consciousness and an awareness of the structure of the underlying political system which has affected the study.

2.7. Alternative ways of conducting the study

Alternative methods would be a quantitative study on specific questions on attitudes where a larger sample would have given a more extensive study providing with an overview of a large sample . However it would then be more difficult to go in depth into individual perceptions of the Internet use and their perception of the Internet's influence on the Iranian society.

¹⁰Arbnor & Bjerke (1994)

3. Background: The Internet in Iran

3.1. Recent history of Iran

Iran with a population of 68,278 million¹¹ is the largest country in the Middle East. Iran occupies the entire eastern Gulf and dominates the strait through which much of the world's oil supply travels, making it of great interest to others. In Iran the majority of the inhabitants are of Persian descent although there are other significant minorities.¹²

Iran became an Islamic republic in 1979 after the ruling shah was forced into exile. The Islamic regime adhered to a theocratic ruling of the state following the rules of the Sharia. The religion came to affect every aspect of the Iranian public society, from the division of the political power to the way people had to dress.¹³ With increasing unemployment and social problems the future of the Iranian economy and society is far from secured.

3.2 Demographic change in young Iran

The Iranian population have increased dramatically in recent years and the population has more than doubled after the Iranian Revolution 1979 as a result of that the regime put restrictions on preservatives in the beginning of the 1980's. Today Iranian youth are better educated than ever before in the Iranian history. 93 % of the Iranian youth between the age of 11-29 are literate and the number of University Students is 1.326 million. Above that Iranian youth are getting married at a later age.¹⁴ This possibly gives an indication of the increased time to spend on recreational things or as in the view of the political leadership a more "problematic" use of the obliged spare-time, such as surfing on the Internet.

¹¹ The World Fact Book (section: Iran) at: <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>

¹² Country Profile 2004 Iran (2004)

¹³ Iranian Revolution, available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian_Revolution

¹⁴ Seyed & Mousavi (2003)

3.3. Diffusion of the Internet in Iran

Press et. al.¹⁵ stress that the Internet can be seen as an opportunity, a threat, or both and that small networking investments may have a significant impact in developing countries. Internet use in Iran has grown drastically the recent years, from 250 000 users in 1994 to 10.4 million users in 2004. This implies an increase of 4150% and makes up of almost 25% of the internet use in the Middle East.¹⁶ Three-fourths of Internet users are between the ages of 21 and 32, and 14% use the Internet 38 hours or more per week¹⁷ See below numerical data showing the growth of Internet use in Iran.¹⁸ We see that the Internet users have almost doubled for each and that the Internet use outweighed PC use in 2003.

Iran - Historical Data (numbers in thousands)						
	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
PCs in use	3,500.00	4,000.00	4,500.00	4,900.00	5,537.58	6,174.30
Internet users	250.00	625.00	1,005.00	3,168.00	6,585.00	10,377.21
ISDN subscribers	-	-	-	0.07	-	-

Source: *Euromonitor*

Iran - Growth Index (numbers in thousands)						
	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
PCs in use	100.00	144.29	128.57	140.00	158.22	176.41
Internet users	100.00	250.00	,402.00	1267.20	2634.00	4150.88
ISDN subscribers	-	-	-	-	-	-

Source: *Euromonitor*

The post-revolution Islamic governments have emphasized infrastructure development as an issue of basic social equity. The telecommunications infrastructure has correspondingly been developed rapidly. Universal access is considered a basic necessity. Iran was the first country in the region to join BITNET, in 1992, and the second to offer public Internet access (albeit the first to have a full-time IP connection), although the degree of availability of that access has since been variable. Public access through commercial services closely followed the establishment of a full-time IP link in 1994, but

¹⁵ Press et. al. (1998, Vol. 41 No. 10)

¹⁶ Middle East Internet and Broadband Report, in: "Internet World Stats – Usage and Statistics at www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#ir

¹⁷ Salvin, Barbara (2006)

¹⁸ Data extracted from Euromonitor database in spring 2005

has not developed consistently due to the vagaries of government policy. Although commercial provision of value-added services is legal and officially encouraged, the government telecommunications sector (Telecommunications and Data Communications Companies of Iran) work behind the scenes to foil private projects while pursuing their own projects.¹⁹

3.4. Regulation of the Internet in Iran

For most of the Internet's history in Iran it has been free from governmental control and regulation. It was not until 2004 that the Iranian government set up some restriction strategies to block internet websites and to filter content. Other methods of restricting the Internet has also been used: in May 2001 the political leadership did close 450 Internet Cafés and every Internet provider is required by law to sign a document guaranteeing that their customers don't get access to immoral material on the web.²⁰ However the government has displayed a great degree of ambivalence about the Internet, with correspondingly irregular shifts in policy. There are several, both practical and ideological, reasons for the fact that the Internet in Iran still is relatively free. Firstly there are technological obstacles that the political leadership has not overcome to create a solid base for control and secondly the economic benefits through the privatization process are major factors contributing to the reluctance to control and hinder Internet use.²¹ On the other hand, also in a religious sense, groups part of the religious rule claiming a new interpretation of islam as the society faces new challenges less regulated by the dogma. This gives the internet a "permission of existence" even from the conservative religious perspective. Also the political leadership has lately found the Internet as a tool to spread their own political messages making it even more difficult to restrict the Internet. The Internet has been used in i.e. presidential election campaigns and by ayatollahs spreading religious messages on the Web. Although the dominant part of authorities, such as the

¹⁹ Goodman et. al. (1998)

²⁰ Rahimi (2003)

²¹ Rahimi (2003)

religious and the political leadership can use the internet with different motives, it is an arena that can't be considered as theirs, and not under their control.²²

4. Theory

Within this section we will explore theories about Internet use and contrasting these theories with theories from the field of political science, using a cross-disciplinary approach.

4.1. Democracy and the Internet

Democracy, rule by the people, is in the modern world considered to be the central legitimating ethic of modern governance.²³ In a democracy there is no discrepancy between the will of the majority of people and the rule of the state. In a democracy the rulers are controlled by the people hence the information about what is happening in the state is crucial for people's role of controlling the state. In our globalizing world the features of democracy will be truly affected as communication tools such as the Internet is at the forefront of development and globalization. Access to efficient communication networks is widely accepted as crucial for growth, innovation, higher productivity and job creation.²⁴ Also global communications like the Internet empowers non-state actors and even individuals and may profoundly influence political and economical conditions.

In the face of increasing globalization the power of the market and transnational corporations are extended and the local community control is eroded. However people are now rejecting the dominant agenda of public (government-controlled spheres) and setting an alternative one.²⁵ When Information Technology and Internet is at the front of globalization it is in this paper of great importance to see how this affects a country like Iran where information about the West is state controlled and censored. How does the globalization in the shape of the Internet affect Iranian youths' thoughts and attitudes about the society?

²² http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4790005.stm (2006-08-25)

²³ Scholte (2004)

²⁴ Aronson (2004)

²⁵ Thomas (2004)

4.1.1. Society in spheres

What is the society? There are as many definitions of the society as there are individuals. In this paper we have chosen to use Jürgen Habermas definition of the society. He claims that the society is divided in different spheres.²⁶

4.1.2. Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas claims that every society is divided in two different spheres, the private and the public sphere.²⁷ Habermas defines and discusses the essentials of the so called public sphere and its own “opinion”. Through larger medias at a macro level as well as meetings person to person at a micro level, even in coffee shops, the sense of the society is established. Habermas claims that the definition of the public sphere is not just the sum of private ideas, but the public sphere is created when these ideas are merged into one idea and through this transformation become public.²⁸ A free society finds its guidelines through this process whilst a non-democratic regime does not. In this later case the public sphere is rather separate from the power of society. These guidelines are supported by the existence of free media.²⁹

What is then the basis of the creation of a common identity; in other words, what makes the base of the public sphere? Spinoso et al. claim that there are certain goods and values that we as individuals interpret as interrelated to our identity. They claim these concerns and values to be “constituted in our daily practices as the basis of our identity as members of a community”³⁰ An example of these concerns and values is i.e. our perception of dresscodes or freedom in society etc. On the one hand we are dependant of these concerns as of constituting our identity and nationality; moreover we take actions according to them. The ways we act in relation to such concerns are different weather we

²⁶ Spinoso et. al. (1997)

²⁷ White (1998)

²⁸ White (1998)

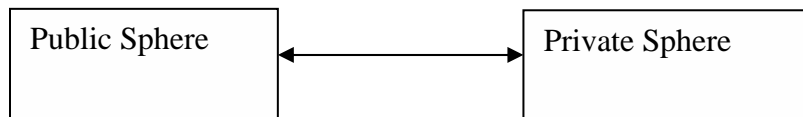
²⁹ Spinoso et al. (1997)

³⁰ Spinoso et al. (1997)

are acting in a free public sphere of a democracy or in a limited public sphere of a controlled society. In Iran the public sphere is restricted as there are censorships by authorities, laws on gender separation etc. But interestingly these restrictions can somehow be neglected through the use of the Internet. Does the Internet hence make part of the public sphere or does the Internet make up a sphere on its own? This question can be answered first after we have explored the meaning of the private sphere.

4.1.3. Private Sphere

What is the private sphere? Three meanings of the private sphere are distinguished in modern political thought according to Cole³¹. Firstly, privacy has been understood as the sphere of moral and religious conscience, referring to the separation of religion and state and the granting to the individual of autonomy in deciding such matters, which are "rationally irresolvable." The second is private enterprise, or the "non-interference by the state in the free flow of commodity relations." The third is the "intimate sphere and meeting the daily needs of life, of sexuality and reproduction, of care for the young, the sick and the elderly which are typically recognized by modern thinkers as belonging to the domain of the household."³² With these definitions of the public and the private sphere we would like to see the how the Internet affects them. What happens when the spheres develop and change? And what causes this change?



³¹ Cole (2003)

³² Cole (2003)

4.2. Drivers of change: Social movements and the creation of meaning

The spheres change as they are dynamic entities and as a result societies change. *"Societies change through conflict and are managed by politics"*³³ states Castells, to define the role of the Internet in the civic society and the state. Castells speaks about the crucial roles of social movements in the process of changing society. Social movements of today are essentially about cultural values. Thus, the communication circles around meaning. The internet allows the posting of information as well as interactive communication, both of them relevant functions of the social movements' change of the society and change of the spheres. According to Castells, all social changes are dependant of communication. Previous movements have used earlier types of communication, such as telephones, faxes, radio, etc. What makes the Internet revolutionary and different from these tools, however, is that it allows two-way communication together with the possibility of networking.³⁴

The fact that the internet is used by the Iranian people in general and the Iranian youth in particular, as well as by the authorities makes the internet an arena in common. As mentioned earlier, the Internet is not just a communication tool; it allows an experience including interaction. This interaction itself includes participation, which allows the values of both the users and the rulers to be challenged. In this way it may open up for a further evolution.

One example of new spheres coming alive could be through Virtual Communities. Castells claims that the Internet was considered to bring very new and different possibilities at early stages by the fact that not everybody reached the medium. As the the Internet diffuses to become a part of the mainstream of communication in society, its edge emerges not to be about communication channels, but more about identity and

³³ Castells (2001)

³⁴ Castells (2001)

identity-building.³⁵ In Sweden, for example, the Internet is not anymore in its earliest stage of diffusion. It has moved from being an “extraordinary” communication tool to a medium for identity building. In countries like Iran where the diffusion is ongoing it is still something different, allowing new possibilities of communication and at the same time it is a forum for identity building. New, or rather separate identities can be created. Even more interesting is however, the fact that the Internet is a medium where a certain identity is allowed to emerge at an arena where interaction between different groups allow them to share the new experiences.

4.3. Virtual Communities

Speaking of virtual communities, it has been argued on the one hand that the Internet can have a promoting effect on communities because of the increased opportunities for individuals to communicate and on the other hand that it can have a hampering effect on the same communities as the inter-personal contact is decreased and a virtual non-personal contact is promoted. Castells states that whatever the case might be, the Internet affects the formation of new communities and fellowships in the way that new, selective patterns of social relationships make up for earlier territorial forms of human collaboration.³⁶ Hence, new communities and new forms of communities gain ground day by day on behalf of previous forms. Its diffusion has a power that is very much stronger than what has been seen before, and it does so by the fact that it transforms from below. Unlike other examples from previous times in history, these changes are not imposed from above ruling authorities, but on the contrary these changes are from below and within, making them hard to control.

4.3.1. Four ways of restricting the Internet

For the focus of this paper, one important point of view is the Internet and its relation to the civil society and the state. There are at least four ways a state can behave when reacting to the upcoming and increasingly widespread presence of the Internet. Firstly, a

³⁵ Castells (2001)

³⁶ Castells (2001)

state could prohibit the existence of the Internet completely. Secondly, the scenario could be as the case is in China, where there are restrictions on content and sanctions directed for trespassing the content restrictions³⁷, Thirdly we have the form that there is in Iran today, where Iran sanctions by restricting *usage opportunities* and *discouraging use*. However, Iranian citizens' access to the Internet remains relatively unrestricted in spite of these measures as there are not any technical restrictions. Fourthly, we have the case as in i.e. Sweden, where the Internet is free without any restrictions at all.

Castells claims that violation against the government's policies regarding the Internet often is too complicated to stop for a government. It could only be punished, but not stopped. A country could choose to stay out of the World Wide Web, but that price is too high for countries, like Iran, who want to compete in the global economy. The surveillance of the Internet is too complicated to implement on a large scale.³⁸ By this sense, the Internet has undermined governmental control and hence national sovereignty.

4.3.2. Living in a society under supervision

Moving over to the Internet in relation to the state; whether or not we live in a democracy or a dictatorship, being permanently exposed to supervision or surveillance, divides the spheres in the way that it makes people create one identity in the supervised sphere, and another identity in the non-supervised one. Since our existence is compound by different identities in different contexts, this can make that our ego is divided in the way that it is something on the web, and something else outside of it. (According to Castells, this gives the risk for persons to internalize the censorship.) The greatest concern for people living under supervision is, according to Castells, the unpredictability of the consequences of their behaviour. He claims that this depends on the context of interpretation which is completely different in various political contexts i.e. one behavior is punished in a totalitarian political context but maybe not in a free context. According to Castells this unpredictability affects lives in dictatorships directly by the fact that the inhabitants do not know the true context nor the criteria of interpretation. Castells states that in democracies

³⁷ Martinson (2005)

³⁸ Castells (2001)

where the authorities are transparent in relation to the people, the people tend to control the authorities. With the introduction of the Internet, also people in a country like Iran are given more of this ability through the Internet, hence the Internet can play a the role of guarantor of freedom.³⁹

According to Castells, societies are transformed thorough conflicts but ruled by politics, i.e. the politics through the government rule, but the big changes come with conflicts.

In a country where information is limited but where the Internet changes this fact, the Internet can increase conflict and hence be a tool to change the society. An example of this is that the cyberspace has become a global forum in an electronic format, where the human discontent has flourished in a wide range of different voices. Not only does it give a chance to speak out opinions, it also help people to find each other and organize each other in ways that without the Internet would have been impossible.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the question is weather the Internet only plays an instrumental role, i.e. is a tool like anything else, or whether it may have the impact to change the rule of the game itself, i.e. has the power to disturb the balance of controlling power.⁴¹

In today's world there is a domination of homogeneous and global information flows, among which there is a tendency to strive for a social autonomy. Firstly, certain social movements has therefore become very important – such as the religious or nationalist movements – i.e. quite old principles get a new meaning when they get a role as a cultural and identical stronghold. Secondly, social movements of today, in order to be successful, tend to fill a need that has been created by the fact that vertically integrated organizations from the industrial era do not fill. Castells say that traditional organizations must abandon their traditional forms of existence being copies of the contemporary bureaucracy and instead find an identity to focus on as core meaning, and examples of such forms are the virtual communities where people independent of place and status organize themselves around a common idea and manifest on the web. Castells claims that

³⁹ Castells (2001)

⁴⁰ Castells (2001)

⁴¹ Castells (2001)

the Internet plays an important role for such manifestations, impacting on the public opinion, and hence in time gets the power over the souls and the minds of the people.⁴²

Finalizing the theory section with Castells, we will in the next section present our results and the analysis made contrasting the theory to the primary and secondary data.

⁴² Castells (2001)

5. Results and Analysis

In the following section we will present our results mainly consisting of primary data from interviews and our analysis of the results. We start with some background information about the interviewees and in the coming sections we will present our analysis based on themes.

5.1. Background information of interviewees

In this paper, the interviewees are presented under pseudonyms as a result of the sensitivity of the questions in relation to the Iranian government. The names are changed and other information as location, age etc is modified:

- **Kaveh**, 23 years old. Kaveh has studied Computer Science at Shiraz University and now works for a state-owned production company. He works in the administration, with quality improvement. On his free-time he sings in a band and plays key-board.

At home he uses the Internet approximately 3 hours per day mostly search engines, news, games and for downloading films and music. He uses it approximately 2 hours per day at work for communication, access and collection of data and to download expert reports and guidelines.

- **Mansour**, 27 years, Living in Tehran and working as Internet Manager for a communication company and as a Marketing Director for an international company. During his free-time he spends time with the few friends he has left living in Iran and takes photos.

At home he uses internet approximately 2 hours per day in order to e-mail friends and get online on Orkut. He uses it approximately 8 hours per day at work in order to communicate with other branches within the company, with customers and for other business purposes.

- **Omnipoya**, 21 years old, came to Sweden a couple of months ago. Omnipoya was in military service for 2 years, which is mandatory. The reason he came to Sweden is that he wants to continue his education. It is hard to do in Iran because of the difficult entrance exams in order to get into the University.

At home in Iran Omnipoya used the Internet one hour once or twice per week, mostly in order to meet girlfriends. In Sweden he uses it approximately 6 hours per day in order to send e-mail to his family and get course material and information about classes.

- **Mahsa**, 23 years old. Mahsa studies Business and Administration at Tehran University and is majoring in the field of Management. During her free time she is an artist, making classical Persian paintings and spends time with her husband.

Mahsa uses the Internet approximately 2 hours per month at work in order to search for information related to her studies, to reach articles in Management.

- **Parvin**, 22 years old. Parvin has studied Computer Science at university and now works for a large Iranian company. She works in a high-level staff function. Apart from this she is an English teacher for children. In her free time she spends time with her boyfriend and the family.

Parvin, she uses the Internet at home 2 hours per day and 6 hours per day at work. At work the main use is to find articles and legal documents. At home she is mostly checking e-mails, getting codes (C++) from the web, chatting and checking news.

- **Babak** is 24 years old and studied to become a veterinary in Iran. He was then obliged to escape from the Iranian security police due to his political activity. He is threatened to life in Iran. Today, living in Sweden, he is hoping to finish his studies. On his free time he writes articles for Swedish newspapers and magazines and is waiting for and hoping to get a Swedish citizenship or residence permit. Babak came to Sweden 2,5 years ago. This interview was conducted in Swedish and then translated into English, with respect to the preferences of the person being interviewed.

At home Babak used the Internet approximately 2 hours per day in Iran and in Sweden around 30 hours per week. In both countries he uses the Internet for writing e-mails and search information about political activities and parties.

5.2. How the Internet adds value

The number of internet users has almost doubled every year for the last decade in Iran.⁴³ This implies that there are increasing numbers of people having access to information which might not be publicly legitimate. There are several ways that the Internet adds value to people. According to Castells the Internet plays both an instrumental and an

⁴³ See data tables at page 12: Internet users went from 6.5 million (2003) to 10.4 million (2004).

emotional role depending on factors such as extent of use and context of use. The context of use is based on how information is treated in a given society and if it can be accessed freely or not. The Internet can affect the context of use and as Castell's states 'change the rule of the game', hence changing the balance of power. Our interviewees explain that there are several ways that the Internet affects their life and in this section we will provide with accounts of this, comparing the primary data with the theory.

5.2.1. Four Different ways of Internet use and value

Public information and foreign news

The experienced added value with the Internet for most of our interviewees is the access to (our remark: foreign) independent information and non-censored TV. For example, Kaveh believes that through the Internet his access of information is increased:

"In Iran the newspapers are not independent. They are politically dependant. But on the Internet there are no restrictions and the Internet is faster. And all information is available in no time."

For Kaveh the Internet adds value by filling the gap of missing information, playing an instrumental role. However the *purpose* of his search is not merely instrumental but rather political. It is political as all actions against public norms become politicized in a closed society. Kaveh's apprehension of the public sphere changes since he gets information that he would not reach without the Internet and that is one example of how the Internet 'changes the rule of the game'.

Through the Internet, another respondent, Mansour, reaches public information, yellow pages and embassy contacts for Visa applications; hence he uses the Internet mainly instrumentally. However, he also finds the Internet useful for reading international news. His main benefit from the Internet is that it eases the access to public information.

“Especially Iran is very weak in public information, yellow pages, etc. there is almost no credible yellow page. Even in the capital Tehran (...)to give you an example... I did apply for Belgium visa 2 weeks ago I went to Belgium embassy website in Tehran on the Internet. They provided full information of what documents I need to apply for a business visa and when I can go there to submit the docs...and I did gather all those documents, and went there and I needed only 30 min to apply. “

Mansour recognizes that Internet's role goes beyond only providing public information as it is also a news source.

“CNN.COM did not come and bang my head you know but I can say it eased access to free information a lot. That's the point that it's so much easier to access the information.”

Mansour acknowledges a personal need and a craving for information as he thinks there is a lack of supply in the national media offer that Internet compensates for, and that Internet by the fact that it is a two-way media, is letting people to communicate.

“Each western citizen has the right to express their views freely, but before the Internet and specially web blog phenomenon, it was very difficult or even impossible for an individual to express their own analysis and point of views in front of huge medias like NBC, CNN. This because the Television and newspapers are one-way media but the Internet is truly a two-way media, letting people to give and get feedback on different issues.”

Mansour explains that the Internet provides an arena for exchange of opinions which is something that does not exist elsewhere.

Professional use

Mahsa says that the Internet does help her a lot in her studies and professionally.

“I use the Internet for business purposes and when I have to search for information. The professor tells us that we have to enter the Internet to search information (...) There are many good sites where you get access to articles in Management and if I have to go to Internet I mainly go to those sites.”

Martinson claim that the Internet adds value to someone like Mahsa by providing new information and new ways of working in a business setting.⁴⁴ According to Martinson, a global context in the business arena gives the users of the global business systems values and ethics that are influenced by the western way of thinking. The Business World incorporates the younger generation even more in a global context than the older by the fact of that in international university studies students use the Internet to reach international articles etc. This gives the younger generation a competitive advantage in global knowledge management and additionally provides the younger generation with values and ethics that are influenced by the western way of thinking.⁴⁵ Hence, our hypothesis is that the Internet used in global business, is a doorstep to impact the Iranian youth.

Communication and leisure

Omnipoya on the other hand doesn't use the Internet as an information provider for news but rather for leisure purposes. In Iran the Internet was his main tool for getting in contact with women. About the use of the Internet, he states that:

“In Iran the Internet was for chatting and follow girls.”

⁴⁴ Martinson (2005)

⁴⁵ Martinson (2005)

Omnipoya's case is an example of the public sphere's trespass onto the private sphere. In certain cases, as in this one, the distinction between the public and the private sphere are clearer than in others. In Iran the Sharia laws give a clear indication of what is allowed and what is not. In the public sphere (on the streets, at school etc.) Omnipoya is not allowed to do things that are categorized according to Habermas to be private; such as meeting girls. Hence the Internet is a way for Omnipoya to go around the barriers in the public sphere in order to fulfill his private needs. Thus, this is an example of how his Internet use has a connection to both the public and the private sphere.

When we asked Parvin how the Internet added value to her she said she that with increased Internet use she got more access to information that she would not reach without the Internet:

"Yes I access art and science more easily now, also a lot of music that is not allowed. I also access all news, since the news are censored in Iran."

Parvin accesses art and science which is allowed but also Western music and non-censored news which is not. She admits the Internet has changed her actions and thoughts as she through the Internet gets access to what is normally prohibited in the public sphere. Parvin finds new things on the Web and finds ways to undergo the restrictions of the public sphere hence the Internet opens up and broadens her perspectives. Things that she meets in these new contexts make her unconsciously adapting to other ways of thinking and other ways of doing things.

Political use

For Babak, the Internet is a vital tool in order for him to function as a human being without feeling limited. He expresses that he learns about his human rights through the Internet. Furthermore, Babak spreads his political knowledge and message inside the

borders of Iran to others, using the Internet as a medium. He did this while living in Iran as well as when he immigrated to Sweden in 2004.

The political system in Iran does not provide with the true picture of itself to the people according to Babak. What is not permitted has to be spread through ways from the outside. Babak finds his meaning of existence through the Internet.

“In Iran, yes you know, how can I say... There you can not access information. I try to inform them (our remark: young Iranians) about freedom and their rights and about how they can fight, and about how maybe the system works if they fight in order to get more freedom, but they may not have such information, they do not have freedom. I try to give them information and knowledge.”

Differentiating himself from the others, Babak acknowledges that he uses the Internet as a medium and as a forum where he finds contact and information, but not only that; he also finds an outlet for meaning and existence. The Internet is in this case his microphone to the outside world where he reaches others in order to create political change and destroy the barriers of the public sphere.

5.2.2. Summary

We have identified 4 areas of use and added value that is provided by the Internet:

1. Public information and foreign news
2. Professional use
3. Leisure and communication
4. Political activity

In point 1 and 2 the Internet is used mainly instrumentally but for point 3 and 4 the emotional involvement is increased. If we couple this information to Castell's theory about Internet use we can see that the more emotionally involved the user is and the less the Internet is used merely instrumentally, the more the Internet becomes an agitator of

change in society, ‘changing the rule of the game’. Babak’s case is a good example since he spreads his political ideas with the help of the Internet. What we see is that the Internet is giving individuals the freedom of not having to organize themselves around current structures but rather around new ideas. Hence, the Internet makes people question current structures and create new ones. This gives the societies new identities which give life to new emotional movements. Given this, the Internet is a big networking opportunity since it allows movements to grow and be coordinated at the same time and this feature can be a powerful political tool.

5.3. The effect of the Internet on personal relationships

Male/female relationships and their socializing process is one aspect that is unmentionable by the Iranian society. Before the Islamic revolution there were fundamental changes in patterns of relationships introduced that were moving towards equality according to Western standards. However since the revolution, there have been restrictions on public spaces where normal socializing processes can take place, segregation, veiling and banning relationships outside marriage etc⁴⁶

It is clear from the previous section that the Internet has increased the communication between people. And with the Internet, males and females can socialize and undergo the hindrance set by the government by chatting on-line, using web messengers and web cameras. Mansour clarifies that:

“Well I can say that for the younger generation Internet had a very big impact on their social life. In these conditions in today’s Iran when the government tries to close whatever way for young people to communicate, internet is heaven. Just open your yahoo messenger and go to ASIA chat room. From 40 people in Asia chat room 38

⁴⁶ Brief history of relationships between men and women in Iran (2002) at <http://www.iranian.com/MassoumePrice/2002/February/Relationships/index.html>

persons are Iranians! It seems Asia has no other internet users at all!

We see that the values of restricting the interaction between men and females have been reinforced even in the private sphere. Some parents, who in another context or society would not be restrictive, choose to adopt the restrictions from the government even within the family to protect their children from public punishment. Mahsa explains that:

“I know that many parents don’t let their children talk to their boy- or girlfriend on the phone. But then they use Internet instead.”

5.3.1. Summary

According to Grotevant & Cooper the foundation of identity – and especially in the case of young people – primarily sources from the family. Secondly it comes from society which is affected the authorities policies and values.⁴⁷ We believe that in the case of a restricted society there is a conflict in the meeting of personal and public values hence between the public and the private spheres. In such a conflict, our interviewees feel misplaced in the society they live in, but through the Internet they find a window to the outside world. Moreover they get new perspectives on their own society and that is what we are going to explore in the next section.

5.4. The view of society

As previously stated the Iranian society has been through a big change after the Islamic Revolution 1979. The Islamic government that got power was very conservative. It nationalized industry and restored Islamic traditions in culture and law. Western influences that were previously promoted were now banned and the majority of the existing pro-western elite fled the country. There were clashes between rival fractions and repression quickly became commonplace.⁴⁸ Since then Western influences have only

⁴⁷ Grotevant & Cooper (1985)

⁴⁸ Iranian history, available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran_history

been allowed and promoted within the area of technology, medicine and the Internet. Within other areas, the authorities have not tried to facilitate change in terms of increased Western influence like clothing or free political debate, but rather put a hampering effect on it.

With the Iranian history as a background it is interesting to see how young Iranians view their society of today in relation to its past. It is also of great interest to study how Internet as a source of information has changed this view. According to a social constructivist approach individuals can share ideas through inter-subjectivity which is a two-way process where new ideas emerge in the meeting between people.⁴⁹ The Internet is a new forum where individuals can meet and interact hence there are bigger chances for new ideas to emerge and affect these individuals. Also access to all the ideas already existing on the Web has an impact. Talking to Mansour, he explains that he gets new perspectives of the government from the Internet:

“Yes of course, Western media shows the world from their own point of view and you receive some information you can not get in local media (...) because of censorship.”

Mansour explains that the Internet has a great impact on his general view of the society but also the society in relation to other countries. Mansour says that from the Internet he receives information about:

“how people live abroad and in more open societies... What kind of visions and ideas are ruling the different countries...”.

This information is used when Mansour then make up his view of the Iranian society. On the Internet not only do new ideas emerge, but they then become public on the Internet as a common place of interaction.

⁴⁹ Jackson and Carter (2000)

Omnipoya clearly shows his disbelief in the government as the sole provider of what is considered as the “truth” in Iran.

“People don’t agree with the government in Iran – most of them.”

He explains that there are alternative view points both politically and emotionally and according to him most people in Iran have opposing opinions compared to the government because of increased contact with the outside world.

Some interviewees on the other hand claim that the Internet has not affected their view of the society. Unsurprisingly these interviewees are those who use the Internet the least. Mahsa says:

“No because I have my view of the regime and the Internet hasn’t affected it. I get more information about the regime through news and papers and through television.”

As previously seen in the section section “How the Internet adds value” Mahsa uses the Internet instrumentally and is a ‘light user’, hence we consider this fact as the main reason for her view not being affected by the Internet. We think it would be highly interesting to see if Mahsa’s opinion would change with increased Internet usage.

5.4.1. Summary

We see that our interviewees’ views of the society are affected by the Internet and the more they use the Internet the more it seems to be affected. On the web new ideas emerge and as they become public reaching a larger mass, they can be part of a change in the view of the Iranian society and hence also change the society as a whole. One of these forums where the new ideas emerge is in the Iranian blogs.

5.5. Iranian Blogs

A forum where alternative views of the public sphere are manifested is in the Iranian blogs. We have asked our interviewees to respond to whether they have read blogs and to what extent the blogs have affected their opinion on their own society. With the closure of most independent newspapers and magazines in Iran, and with an estimated 100.000 active blogs written by Iranians; blogs have proven to be an effective tool of communication in Iran. In a closed society where unofficial voices about how the society functions internally are forbidden, the blogs provide interesting new perspectives on the unofficial picture of the society. The definition of a blog is that it is a weblog, a journal or newsletter that is frequently updated and intended for general public consumption. Blogs generally represent the personality of the author or the Web site and as the writer can be anonymous, subjects might appear there that would be too sensitive to talk about if so weren't the case.⁵⁰ Iran being the third country in the world in number of bloggers,⁵¹ blogs are opening up Iranian society and culture, despite the enduring threat of government censorship and imprisonment of journalists and activists. There is no legislation against blogging itself but the writers can be charged by authorities with "morality violations" for the content of their websites.⁵² Most of the interviewees admit they have read blogs. The blogs that they read about treated subjects like divorced women, politics but also about celebrities and how a normal day can be living in the West. Mansour claims that:

“Because of censorship in state media, people like myself are turning to Internet and blogs as a news source, and it works pretty well.”

Babak also claims that he reads blogs to get informed about the society:

⁵⁰ Blog definition: www.bytowninternet.com/glossary, 2005-12-15

⁵¹ Swift, Lillian (2005)

⁵² Swift, Lillian (2005)

"...It is possible to inform oneself much more than before. There are lots of blogs where you are informed and I know much more what happens now and how people do and what is happening. A lot of information they [our remark: the government] try to withhold in Iran. Sometimes you can get the information in Iran, but you have to fight for it (...) and search for it in sources like the blogs."

Not only political issues are discussed in blogs but subjects within the private sphere:

"Women in Iran cannot speak out frankly because of our Eastern culture and there are some taboos just for women, such as talking about sex or the right to choose your partner. The web is providing a way for women in Iran to talk freely about taboo subjects such as sex and boyfriends."⁵³

We see that the blogs play an important role in the Iranian society and work as a microphone for those voices that are unheard under the governmental restrictions and the restrictions within the private sphere. Interestingly however, some interviewees like Parvin and Mahsa claimed that blogs mainly give an alternative view of the society to those who don't live in Iran. In the blogs they claim you can read about subjects like i.e. Iranian prostitution which officially is not mentioned, but this is a subject that many people know about and discuss privately and secretly in Iran in the meeting between people face to face. However we would like to claim that this is a way for these taboo subjects and stories that are passed on face to face between individuals, to be elevated and reach the mass in the society, creating discussions in a public forum. To consider is also that many of the taboo subjects known and discussed by Iranians face to face are often topics which first appeared in a blog on the web. Hence we see that for the purpose of reaching the mass and creating a forum of discussion in public, the blog phenomenon seems to be a tool of change in society. And it is a tool that can't be controlled by the government. An Iranian blogger known as Saena, wrote recently:

⁵³ Hermida (2002) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/2044802.stm> BBC news

*"Web blogs are one weapon that even the Islamic Republic cannot beat."*⁵⁴

5.5.1. Summary

We see in this section that the Internet in the form of blogs make Iranians question the legitimacy of the public sphere's monopoly as the sole source of information on providing the picture of the Iranian society. It seems like the Iranian authorities are fighting a losing battle to crush these new outlets of dissent by trying to block sites. As fast as one blog-writer is tracked down and his site is closed, another rises in its place and takes up the cause of providing the public with the unofficial picture of Iran.

5.6. Virtual communities

Virtual communities are the true discussion forums on the web differentiating themselves from the blogs by enabling discussions live. Internet communities have had great impact on the communication between people and have created an arena for open discussion as free political debate and especially debates containing opinions opposed to the political leadership, are forbidden in Iran. Parvin explains:

"There are Internet communities that have changed the opinions of people. Orkut for example is a web based network where there are links between people and they can interact with each other. There it is possible to write messages to all people to i.e. start manifestations, and of course all information diffuses rapidly in this network. The government found out about this and they tried to block the site 4-5 months ago. I find Orkut to be something completely normal, you find friends and the relationships between individuals increase. This is seen as a threat to the government, so when I found out about this

⁵⁴ Swift, Lillian (2005)

[our remark: the ban on the site by the government] I signed up and became a member!”⁵⁵

In the interaction between people the group is formed. By belonging to a group the interaction becomes meaningful. It vitalizes the group and the members feel they have something in common. Hence it keeps the group together and in the best case it can expound and refine the group.⁵⁶ The important thing here are what the different types of possible interactions are based on. The different types depend on power or dialogue. When the interaction is based on an unbalance of power, this in itself is preventing dialogue, like in the case of the public Iranian society. The crucial notion is that power and dialogue are opposites of each other. When power makes a group stay together the case becomes authoritarian, where social pressure to behave and express oneself in certain ways is imposed by one person or the group itself. The result becomes alignment. On the contrary when the dialogue is what holds the group together like in the virtual communities, hence, different opinions are welcome, arguments and reasoning is the driving force instead of unbalanced power.⁵⁷ What we see fulfilled here is what Castells calls the networking of social movements⁵⁸ which is when the Internet has created a forum for voices of dissatisfaction enabling them to organize themselves in a way that was not possible before.

5.7. Freedom in society

What is freedom in society? According to a social constructivist view the world is socially constructed, and every individual has their own definition of freedom, however it is very likely that this definition is very similar to those definitions of others that the individual interacts with. This indicates that there also might be discrepancies in these definitions if interaction is less between certain individuals and groups. Hence, we have

⁵⁵ Orkut (www.orkut.com) has 1 million Iranian users, which make it a large forum for interaction amongst Iranians.

⁵⁶ Castells (2001)

⁵⁷ Gilljam & Hermansson (2003)

⁵⁸ Castells (2001)

to acknowledge that freedom according to Iranian youth can be very different from what is perceived as freedom in the West. We asked the interviewees whether their view of freedom in society had changed since they started using the Internet. Five of six interviewees thought that the Internet had had an impact on their view of freedom in the society.

Babak claimed that the Internet has opened up his eyes for what freedom really is for him.

“When you come from a country like Iran, you do not think of certain things before you’re confronted to them, like faith and dress codes for women. Not until you see that people doesn’t wear them and still are ok, you understand that there are some things that are forbidden even though it’s not obvious that they should be“

What Babak says is that the Internet provides a channel to the outside world, outside the ‘reality’ that he lives in, hence the Internet brings new information that make one question the ‘reality’ one lives in and hence the entire political establishment. Since the Islamic Revolution only one public identity and reality has been allowed, however the Internet has since its introduction provided with alternative realities. Internet makes people hence more aware of that they are not free.

The Islamic Revolution presented a new Islamic identity after 1979. Consequently, concepts such as the Islamic Republic and the world of Islam won over the overall political and public relations as opposed to the concepts of the West and non-Islam; there was thus limited room for the emergence and growth of alternative identities. The new Islamic identity not only dominated the public sphere but made co-existence with all other identities impossible. Internet, however, opens up space for these new identities, letting them affect the public sphere. This we mean can change the view of the public sphere once the interaction with the rest of the world gets more frequent.

We see clearly that Internet has affected the respondents' view of freedom in one way or another. However, Mahsa says the Internet has not affected this view as she perceives freedom as something excluded from the public sphere. Mahsa says that the Internet has not changed her view of freedom due to the following reason:

“No, since firstly there is not a low degree of freedom in society, because if you want something you do it. Here you can do anything that you want to do. The society tells people to behave in a certain way but they still act as they wish, behind closed doors or not.”

If you can do whatever you want privately behind closed doors, that is enough in order to have freedom according to Mahsa. What we can see is that Mahsa is the respondent who uses the Internet the least and as mentioned earlier the Internet is often like a window opening up eyes for that people are not free and the responses from our other interviewees suggest that her opinion might well change if and when her use of the Internet increases and becomes more varied.

5.7.1. The government and its restrictive attitude towards Internet use

As we have seen in “Four ways of restricting the Internet” (page 18) the Iranian government uses different tools in order to supervise their population i.e. through censorship, the revolutionary guardian police and restrictions on clothing and behavior in public. However for most of its short history in Iran, the Internet has been free of control and regulation. Unlike other Middle Eastern states, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Iran has encouraged the expansion of the Internet and the state has actively participated in its development. While in recent years the government in Iran have enacted policies to control the spread of other new technologies, especially satellite TV, it was not until 2004 that the Iranian government produced any systematic strategy to

block certain Internet websites.⁵⁹ By comparison, Iran is technically far behind China's advanced computer infrastructure where content is filtered. As Mansour claims:

“It [our remark: the Internet] has a great impact on people and also government behaviour, because for the first time ever, this is a free media they virtually can not control. Virtually I would say, because they are doing their best to control it and they are successful in some ways.”

To summarize the Internet in Iran is relatively free apart from some governmental attempts to block certain sites; nevertheless there is censorship in other media, mainly in TV and print.

5.7.2. Censorship

We asked our interviewees about the degree of censorship in media and Kaveh said that:

“(...) in Iran it is different from Europe because the TV-channels are censored but in the Internet only a few pages are censored and the rest of it is not.”

Castells claims that informational control has historically always been linked to the power of the government. If the government loses this power of information its power overall is undermined.⁶⁰ This is why the power of information is such a burning question for the Iranian government. One tool that they use to control information is censorship. Everything from sexual content, international politics, local grumbling, and anything else that makes the Islamic leadership uneasy is being censored in Iran. On the Internet however it is impossible for the government to control it without staying out of the www-

⁵⁹ Rahimi (2003)

⁶⁰ Castells (2001)

network. They are trying to block sites but they can't hinder people to reach the information they need, what they only can do is to punish infringement.

*"It shows their (our remark: the government) paranoia. They fear these sites and blogs could someday become a way for protesters to communicate and organize. They are trying to control the Internet before it can control them."*⁶¹

Hence we see that the Iranian people receive information not only from publicly legitimate sources inside the country, but also from outside Iran; by email from people keeping them informed, by international news sites and by political movements on the web. Thus interestingly the Internet provides a vital tool for the Iranian population to reverse the case of supervision and to supervise their government. An example of this is that the Internet has forced the government to publish information to a larger extent since news or information would reach the Iranians anyway through the web. In this way people controls the extent to what information should be published or not. As Kaveh puts it:

"You have to remember that maybe 95 % of the news are already published in the Iranian papers, and it needs to be published otherwise people would oppose. (...) it will reach Iranians anyway through rumours or from elsewhere , like maybe the Internet"

5.7.3. The government's strategic use of the Internet

The government has understood that the Internet is a way to reach the Iranian people at a larger extent hence they have started to use it for their own purposes in order to avoid to loose control and the reversion of power. Parvin claims that:

⁶¹ Murphy (2006) *Our remark: according to Derakhshan, who initiated the Iranian blog boom in 2001 by posting simple instructions to create sites in Persian.,*

“The regime uses Internet for their own purposes; they put films on the Internet about how they punish people who are active politically. The thing is that the regime knows that the trust on news in Iran is low so if we normal people find something in the Internet then we will think that it is true. Then they put up fake confessions or other things to blame certain people and many people accept that.”

Another respondent Kaveh says:

“The regime put a film on the internet where they chop heads of people. They do this to scare Iranians so that Iranians shouldn’t try to overthrow the regime and get a society like Iraq.”

Parvin and Kaveh are aware that the Internet also has been used as a tool for the government to both scare people and to give their perspectives on different matters.

5.7.4. Summary

We see that the Iranian government use the Internet in their favour as well as their opponents. The government has hence entered the battle of information by using the same weapon as those who oppose them. By doing this, they will be able to spread their own message in a new efficient way but at the same time they also support and guarantee the existence of a free media like the Internet, where all kinds of different ideas are flourishing.

5.8. Discussion – the Internet as a virtual sphere

We have seen in the section above how the government has put restrictions on the public sphere. The public sphere is restricted as there is no free forum for discussions but the government restrictions also intrude on private matters and hence the public sphere has

trespassed into the private sphere. We would like to look into what this trespassing implies for the two spheres and whether we can state that a new sphere is created.

5.8.1. Limitations on the Private sphere

To recap from the theory section, Cole claims that the private spheres has three notions, i) sphere of moral and religious conscience, referring to the separation of religion and state, ii) private enterprise, or the "non-interference by the state in the free flow of commodity relations." iii) the "intimate sphere and meeting the daily needs of life, of sexuality and reproduction belonging to the domain of the household."⁶²

The Iranian government has acted as if the first and the last notions of these three meanings of the private sphere do not apply. The individual does not have the right to separate between public issues and religion and the political leadership controls what is within the domain of the household, such as the meetings between men and women, choice of clothes etc. In this sense the public sphere has trespassed onto the private sphere of individuals. Importantly, apart from the public sphere's trespass on the private sphere, the private sphere is also restricted from within by moral and social restrictions imposed by parents and the community. These restrictions are in the domain of the intimate sphere and contact between men and women. Omnipoya gives an example of this when he explains:

"I have never had a conflict in my family. They agree about my own way of life. My parents do not like the regime either and are not religious. My parents and friends they know what I do (...) but this is not the case for most young people."

The private sphere limits and interferes with young Iranians' lives because of two reasons; primarily because parents internalize the repression by the government by adopting their values on their youth as they know that following this path will make their youth to stay out of trouble. Secondly, there is a more conservative paradigm of Islam

⁶² Cole (2003)

and Middle Eastern culture affecting the moral standards – independent of the governmental repression. As a female Iranian blogger puts it:

*"Women in Iran cannot speak out frankly because of our Eastern culture and there are some taboos just for women, such as talking about sex or the right to choose your partner."*⁶³

Hence we see that Iranian youth are restricted by the public sphere and the rules set by the government and also by the private sphere due to cultural taboos and restrictions set by parents. What consequences does this have on the Iranian youth's feelings and how do they overcome the restrictions of the two spheres?

5.8.2. The Internet as a forum for expression and identity- creation of the Virtual sphere

We know from Castells and Habermas that living in a society under supervision, as both the private and the public spheres have restrictions on individual expression, has emotional consequences. An Iranian blogger known as "Scarecrew" said:

*"Sometimes I feel like I'm living in an island. What is it that they don't want us to know? ... No matter how, I just wanna get myself out of this place."*⁶⁴

Scarecrew is feeling confused and deprived part of his freedom. The Internet has a dual role in this as it in one way shows the individual that he is deprived of something by showing how an alternative way of living or society would be, on the other hand when the individual already has this knowledge the Internet becomes a way to escape the harsh reality. We believe that this escape is through the Internet to a virtual sphere created by interaction and communication between people outside the surveillance of the public and private sphere. The Internet in this context is not just a communication tool as it creates a

⁶³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/2044802.stm> BBC news

⁶⁴ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/2044802.stm> BBC news

forum for existence and growth of individual expression, hence we see the Internet as a sphere. In the virtual sphere the individual escapes the conflicts with the public and the private sphere and can have a social life, friends, discussions etc based on individual values not allowed in the other spheres. The virtual sphere is a unique place where what is not allowed to be expressed in the other spheres can be articulated. As Parvin describes it:

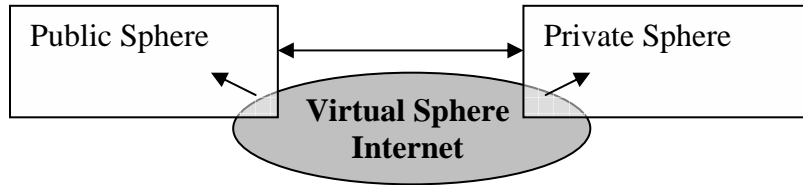
“I have a good feeling about Internet, I want to know more about everything. I have more abilities now and I have more freedom.”

We see from our interviewees that in the virtual sphere, i.e. the Internet, they have a forum enabling them to meet others of the same opinion that they would not have an arena to meet on, in a totalitarian society. This virtual sphere functions as a mirror of values and personality, i.e. recognition of identity which is not provided in the totalitarian society.

5.8.3. The virtual sphere's impact on the public and the private sphere

What we have seen throughout our analysis is that the spheres are not constant but change. In Iran the public sphere has expanded on to the private sphere making it smaller. We have seen that different factors have caused this change i.e. censorship where the public sphere imposes its values on the private sphere. We argue that the Internet affects both the public and the private sphere by constituting a sphere of its own where individuals can express themselves and avoid the restrictions of the public and the private sphere. All Internet use is not comprised by the virtual sphere, it is the Internet use that undergoes restrictions in the private or the public sphere- which create the Virtual sphere. We claim that the Internet affects the relationship between the private and the public sphere as they are permeable and the Internet penetrates into them. An example of this is when a person avoids the restrictions of the public sphere by using the Internet to do something that is prohibited by the government i.e. when this person writes a blog about political oppression on the web, hence this person enters and acts in the virtual sphere. The blog can start political discussion and will reach numerous people and in time start

affecting and changing the public sphere. In this new sphere anonymity creates a way to be in relation to the private sphere i.e. in blogs, and to the public sphere i.e. in Internet communities.



The virtual sphere creates a forum enabling individuals the option to interact, an option which otherwise would have been impossible in the closed society. By penetrating the public and the private sphere, the virtual sphere changes them- hence becoming a driver of change in the Iranian society.

What we have seen is that there is more permeability between the virtual and the private sphere as it is easier to escape restrictions imposed in this area by the government or at home through the virtual sphere and an example of this is when a young woman chats with a young man without permission. However in a longer perspective, there is also permeability with the public sphere but as it depends on change of emerged ideas of many individuals on a public level this takes more time.

6. Conclusions

We would like to state that it has not been in our intention to make a general case out of these six interviews. Our intent has been to provide an understanding of how Internet use has affected the perception of the Iranian society and let six voices be heard regarding these issues. We are aware of that we give the reader a fragmented picture of how things are, but we believe that these fragments are part of what is the reality, even though they are not the entire reality.

We have seen that in a society with more than one paradigm ruling, one in the public sphere and one in the private sphere, the control of the communication systems is crucial, as from there, it is possible to affect the consciousness of the whole society. The government in Iran do control media such as national TV and papers through censorship; however they do not control the Internet and we consider it as a free sphere of interaction and information sharing.

The interviews have shown us that the Internet has clearly affected our interviewees view on their society as through the Internet the access to information is increased and Iranians can receive opposing information to what is the dogma in the public and private sphere. We have seen that young Iranians are restricted in free individual expression both in the public sphere and in the private sphere as they feel they are under surveillance. To escape this surveillance young Iranians turn to the Internet and because of all the new information about alternative ways of living- they enter a new world where there is interaction and communication between people outside the surveillance of the public and private sphere. We claim that the Internet in this case is not merely a communication tool but makes up a sphere of its own. It is a sphere as young Iranians who enter in the virtual sphere can live through a counter reality vs. how things are in the public and the private sphere, escaping the reality outside. The Internet creates a forum for existence and growth of individual expression; hence in the virtual sphere the individual escapes the conflicts with the public and the private sphere and can have a social life, friends, discussions etc based on individual values not allowed in the other spheres.

As Castells states, individuals can now also inform those who initially were without information and furthermore influence political as well as economical conditions on the local national arena as well as impacting the latter through a global arena. This paper claims that the Internet can be used by grassroots/dissidents to oppose an authoritarian regime, because it essentially defies control and supervision.

Moreover, we clearly see how emerged ideas through elaboration have become parts of the public sphere and not only affecting the public sphere but also defining it, which is in line with Habermas. This holds as different individuals and groups can participate in a struggle against the government by entering a virtual sphere of web based interaction. An example illustrating this is when Babak sends out his political messages to his community, changing other individuals' way of viewing the public sphere. This upcoming virtual sphere which is created during interaction and communication between individuals on the web, affect both the public sphere and the private sphere. As the Internet opens up for the possibility of virtual communities to exist as well as increased communication between individuals, it is a driver of change as restrictions in the private and the public sphere can be neglected.

As an alternative provider of information the Internet affects the balance of power in society. Previously the government controlled the supply of information but the Internet has changed the situation; we see that the Internet change the balance of power between the people and the government, as the people with increased information can monitor their counterpart. Furthermore, our results suggest that government-controlled media are influenced in their choices about what to report by the fact that they know people will get access to unrestricted information through the Internet. In this way, it seems that the content and use of the Internet contributes to reduced censorship also in government-controlled media.

7. Epilogue

Writing this thesis provided us with numerous eye-opening insights about the situation in Iran and Internet's influence on the youth's perception of the society but also about freedom. In our analysis we came to the understanding that freedom of speech is seen as one of the most crucial components of freedom. The Internet provides with freedom of speech and hence broadens the interviewees' perception of freedom. Our firm belief is that this will impact a democratic process – if not necessarily in this youth generation – in the youth generation to come. We believe that a dictatorship cannot survive without the support of enough people to keep the system alive.⁶⁵ The exposure to new ideas will convert individuals one by one, and together they become a stronger critical mass once they become organized, i.e. on the web or at the virtual communities. Hence, society as a whole will change, due to the fact that Internet enables the change on an individual grass root level, eventually creating a large enough critical mass which sooner or later will have the power to change the society.

⁶⁵ Inspired by interview with Colet, Assistant Professor at ESADE.

8. Appendix: Interview Template

8.1. Interview Guide

When interviewing our interviewees, we have asked the following questions:

- Name
- Age
- Gender
- Education
- Profession/Occupation
- Where do you use the Internet?
- How often use Internet at home?
- How often use Internet at work?
- What do you use Internet for at work?
- What do you use Internet for? At home (in Iran)?
- What do you use Internet for? At home (in Sweden)?
- When did you start using the Internet? Do you use it more often now compared to before?
- Have you read blogs? If so, what did they tell you?
- Do blogs give an alternative view of the Iranian society?
- If yes, in what way? If not, why not?
- Do you access information you would not reach without the Internet?
- Has your view of the society changed since the introduction of the Internet?
- Has your view of freedom in society changed? Give example.
- Has your view of family and close friends changed? Give example.
- Has the Internet given you ideas that you would not have got from elsewhere?
- Has the Internet changed the way you act somehow? How?
- Has it changed your feelings?
- Has it changed your thoughts?

When having started the analysis, we acknowledged a need for some follow-up interviews, as follows:

- Follow-up question to Mahsa regarding how internet can affect relationships.

Mahsa, when you say that people have prohibited their children to use internet, does this mean that they are cut off from it totally?

- Follow-up question to Mansour on if his view of the regime changed since the introduction on the Internet.

We: Why can you not get it in local media?

- Follow-up question to Babak on if his view of the regime changed since the introduction on the Internet.

We: When you say you have to fight for it, can you specify that?

- Parvin about Orkut

We: When you say it was blocked Parvin do you mean that it is closed forever and that the possibility is gone?

- Babak on view on Freedom in Society

We: It was very interesting to hear you talking about your view of freedom in society. Can you explain more about that?

8.2. Interview guide for interview with Assistant Professor Colet

Date: May 20

Don Señor Enric Colet

Associate Professor, ESADE

How do you see the relation between freedom and the Internet when looking at Iran?

How does the Internet influence the society?

Can it be an agitator?

Do you see any differences between Iran and for example China? Could Iran be a case like China?

What way do you think that the development in Iran will be as it is a closed society with restrictions on behavior and censorship but where there is rather free Internet access?

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