

Being Written While Writing: Crafting Selves in the Persian Blogosphere

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Dedication

For Sima

تکرار می‌کنم نامت را
چون شطحی
در لحظه‌های سرخوشی.

Abstract

THIS DISSERTATION EXAMINES HOW PEOPLE change in the process of creating through the prism of a particular creative site of material production—the Persian blogosphere. In Iran, blogging is a popular means for producing self-centering narratives—i.e., written accounts centering around one’s lived experience—, making Persian one of the top 10 blogging languages. As it deploys ethnographic research to explore blogging, a medium enabled by the coming together of technology, language, and people, this project questions the received ideas of what media do. The findings of this research challenge conventional ideas of media that center on symbolic representation instead of material creation.

This ethnography explores the intervening processes, material techniques, unintentional creations, and creative accidents that go into the making of blogposts and bloggers’ inner selves. This study also shows that local traditions and understandings inform writing practices in the Persian blogosphere.

As it uncovers the processes through which people gain new understandings of the world, this ethnography examines not only the uniquely Iranian qualities or uses of the Internet, but also how singularities in this specific field of cultural forces led to the birth of these qualities and functions. This research, moreover, explores how writing blogs helps Iranian become autonomous subjects, which in turn changes the dynamics of power at a micro level.

This project is not, however, either another anthropocentric account of self-fashioning of an autonomous subject acting as the sole source of its own authority, nor a representational study of the subject’s narrative. As it takes its scrutiny beyond the realm

of meaning, narratives, and stories, where the already-constituted individual has an ontological privilege, this research shows that the seemingly autonomous selves, in their self-fashioning projects, depend upon the materiality of the technology and that of written words. Although ultimately about identities crafted online, this ethnography therefore underlines an understanding of fashioning selves that concerns itself with the negotiation of alterities rather than the formation of identities. In its contributions to the anthropology of the self, media, technology, and writing, this research shows that identities crafted through media are made possible because of those alterities.

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عادت دریا آنست که تا زنده است، او را فرو می‌بَرد، چندانکه غرقه شود و بمیزد.
چون غرقه شد و بُمرد، برگرددش و حَمّال او شود.

- مقالات شمس تبریزی

It's the sea's habit. It swallows one until one is drowned and dead.
After one is drowned and dead, the sea raises and carries one.

- The Essays of Shams-e Tabrizi

1

Chapter 1: Introduction

1-1- THE DISSERTATION

THIS DISSERTATION INVESTIGATES THE ONLINE creation of selves in the Persian blogosphere. In the chapters that follow, I examine how during my online fieldwork in the Persian blogosphere bloggers fashioned selves in shifting and emerging fields of power by giving an account of themselves through using the technology of blogging. Iran is uniquely well-suited for my investigation. Not many years ago, it was the third most active online country in the world (Joffe-Walt, 2010) and blogging

constituted a sizeable part of Iranian online life. Blogging in Iran—which unlike other regional practices of blogging has its own Wikipedia entry—is an extremely popular form of producing self-centering narrative compositions to the extent that Technorati, an exclusive blog search engine, listed Persian among the 10 most common blogging languages (Sifry, 2007).

In September 2001, Hossein Derakhshan, an Iranian journalist who was later sentenced to 17 years in jail partly owing to his blog, published a how-to guide for publishing Persian blogs. Since then hundreds of thousands of Iranians have created blogs, largely focusing on the daily experiences of bloggers. The title of Derakhshan’s own blog “Editor: Myself” indicates the self-centering spirit of the dominant narrative among pioneers in the Persian blogosphere. Conducted between 2013 and 2016, my research focuses on this group of bloggers whose blogs functioned as personal online diaries. It is generally believed that the exponential growth of Iranian blogs of this type was due to the Iranian government’s strict control over traditional media to the extent that many of the identities expressed in the Persian blogosphere simply could not have been articulated elsewhere. The explicit political significance of the Persian blogosphere attracted attention inside and outside of academia, amounting to a body of research (Alavi, 2005; Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008a, 2008b; Rahimi, 2003) that conceived of blogging as a transparent means for reflecting Iranian bloggers’ inner selves. As a result, existing accounts tended to scrutinize the Persian blogosphere to learn about the identities that were supposedly mirrored in the content—identities that otherwise had little possibility

for expression. Such analyses tended to totalize Iranian bloggers' identities as defiant against the Islamic regime.¹

In my research, I problematize the idea of blogging as a simple representation of the blogger's inner self. I instead ask in this research: if we consider blogging as a processual method of self-creation rather than a simple means for representation of an already formed self, what are we able to make of Iranian bloggers? Testimonials of "finding oneself" abounded in the discourse of Iranian bloggers with whom I talked. My dissertation suggests that Iranian bloggers situated in fields of power that shifted in response to online and offline power dynamics crafted selves through writing self-centering narratives. In other words, borrowing an analogy from Deleuze and Guattari (1977), my research shows that the Persian blogosphere was not a "theater" where bloggers simply staged already formed inner selves.² It was a "factory" whereby bloggers continually fashioned selves. In addition, my research goes a step further to argue that it was not only the content of the self-centering narratives that was central in self-crafting. Of equal significance in the procedure was the medium of blogging itself: blogging was enfolded in a specific technological medium which, in the context of the dominant modern Iranian culture that values separation of inside and outside (Beeman, 2001) as well as coherency in identity (Najmabadi, 2005), is best characterized as an "in-between"

¹ Sima Shakhsari's PhD dissertation (Shakhsari, 2010) is one of the first analyses that took issue with this view of the Iranian blogosphere. She argues against the depiction of the Persian blogosphere as "a uniformly secular anti-Iranian "regime"" (p. 16) and considers it to be "a site of performance" that helps "produce transnational subjects in a productive tension" (p. 211).

² The consideration of blogs as a representational technology of self-disclosure (rather than a technology for fashioning selves) is a pattern still observed in the more recent studies of the medium. For instance, in the context of micro-blogging in China, look at (Liu, Min, Zhai, & Smyth, 2016) that takes the medium to be a means for self-disclosure.

form of writing (most significantly, in-between public and private). The following chapters examine how the medium of blogging played a role in the procedure of self-crafting.

The self is known through its articulation and blogging offered to my informants a technological means for this articulation. As such, the practice conditioned the blogger's interiority. When my interlocutors composed self-centering narratives and put themselves at the center of their narratives, as a byproduct of self-crafting, they also realized their significance and power. This research thus also examines the unprecedented self blogging helps create; a self whose realization of its power has changed the political scene in Iran.

The purpose of the current dissertation is therefore threefold: First, to demonstrate how Iranian bloggers fashioned themselves through giving a written account of themselves; second, to research how blogging as a specific writing technology within the context of the dominant Iranian culture contributed to the formation of the Iranian bloggers' selves; third—since through the procedure of inscriptive self-crafting individuals turned into protagonists of their lives and realized their power—to study the political consequences of new modes of subjectivity enabled by blogging.

In sum, this dissertation looks at how people manage themselves while managing their blogs. It however does not center its analysis on representation and, as such, gives an alternative understanding of media by drawing attentions to other kinds of user-medium relationships. Studying procedures of self-creation contributes to the anthropological understanding of self. In addition to enhancing our view of the role of creative processes as a means of identity formation, it also addresses the broader question of transformative qualities of technology, as well as the contribution of the materiality of

semiotic forms to the creation of selves. Moreover, studying the Persian blogosphere is an unparalleled way to examine the inscriptive process of self-creation because it is ubiquitous and extensive. Finally, due to its “in-between” nature, blogging adds a twist to our cultural understanding of language and place in the context of the dominant Iranian culture.

Before delving directly into the topic of my research in chapters 2 through 6, in the next sections of this chapter, following an organization of the thesis that I hope is not too unconventional, I will first sample the type of questions with which the rest of my dissertation grapples.³ For that, I do not limit the examples to which the findings of my dissertation can be applied to the Persian blogosphere. The sections that follow also give us a taste of the type of evidence on which I will draw. My evidence ranges from ethnographic findings in the Persian blogosphere to historical literary texts. I will also try to mimic in the next sections of this introduction, as much as it is appropriate for a dissertation, the nature of blogposts I studied in the course of my fieldwork. Similar to the following sections, blogposts of the type I studied drew on the personal experiences and understandings of bloggers and reacted to and addressed events taking place in the world around them—a world as small as the blogger’s mind and as large as the globe. Like the next sections of this introduction, blogs I read did not particularly follow one unique line of thought or recount a linear narrative. They also did not necessarily maintain their ‘topic’ throughout time. Like the sections of this introduction, blogs I

³ For this reason, the reader may consider chapter 2 as a more proper introduction to the dissertation.

studied were marked by both fragmentation and continuity. Blogs that I studied were juxtapositions of unlike, unexpected, and unconnected items—just similar to episodes in the history of Iranian mysticism, snippets of Persian literature, personal experiences, anthropological theory, and ethnographic evidence I will shortly present in the sections of this introduction. In addition, although blogs I studied might seem to be a way of giving continuity and coherence to one's experiences, unlike conventional autobiography they provided an incoherent form of writing. In fact, although the chronological order of a blog arranged the blogger's experience, it was the same chronological format that made fragmentation possible. Following these blogs for some time, I was able to recognize the individual blogger's *voice* and his or her concerns, as varied as they may be. In these blogposts, the question of the self and self-fashioning was directly or indirectly addressed. Finally, although the writing skills of bloggers with whom I worked were varied, I found them all to be creative, for regardless of their abilities in creative writing, their creation invariably took an inward direction to fashion and alter selves.

1-2- MAD MEN

Mailad's Viber, a smartphone VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) and instant messaging application massively popular in Iran during part of my fieldwork, rang a few times before he answered my call.⁴ I was calling to congratulate him on his new position as a

⁴ A majority of Iranian users gradually migrated from Viber to Telegram Messenger in 2015 partially as a preemptive action since there were rumors that Viber would soon be restricted by the government and also partially because of Telegram's better performance, especially with handling larger video files. In September 2014, Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejei, the top deputy of the judiciary branch, in a letter to the President Rouhani described Viber as a medium containing immoral and criminal content and asked for it,

marketing specialist at an electronic commerce company in Tehran. I had learned about his most recent life milestone a couple of weeks back and had already passed on my best wishes to him via email. But I also meant to congratulate him over phone, because, as ironic as it may sound, I thought an electronic note would be insufficient, given the scale of the achievement and the history and extent of our interactions and friendship. But finding a suitable time that worked for both of us was no easy task. We were living in countries with different workweeks and weekends, in time zones 9½ hours apart. Worrying that the new job news would soon be ancient history if I did not talk with him immediately, I selfishly called him on a Saturday, a weekend day for me, with the intention of not keeping him on the phone for long on his weekday evening.

After exchanging greetings, congratulating him on his new job, and updating one another on our work and life, we talked about a recurring topic: films we had recently watched and books we had recently read. I mentioned that I was impatiently awaiting the end of the academic year when my wife, Sima, also a graduate student, and I have more time to spare so we could rent and watch the final season of *Mad Men*, an American television series aired between 2007 and 2015 set in the 1960s and '70s, recounting the story of employees at a fictional advertising agency on Madison Avenue in New York City. Joking about people in Iran watching films and TV series even before many viewers in the US, Milad told me that he had binge-watched all of the aired episodes of the series,

along with Whatsapp and Tango, two other messaging applications, to be restricted (<http://goo.gl/0dj0LL>). The migration to Telegram Messenger, its popularity, group messaging and channel features, and ease of use were acknowledged as significant factors in the relative victory of moderates in the 2016 parliament elections (<https://goo.gl/PHZnG7> & <http://goo.gl/kcwVuX> & <http://goo.gl/ogb634> & <https://goo.gl/9kfOnN>). Telegram was however criticized by the Committee to Protect Journalists for its unsecure features putting users, especially journalists, at risk (<https://goo.gl/quGD13>).

thanks to a widespread video piracy industry in the country, in part the result of the state's not being subject to WTO (World Trade Organization) copyright laws. As I was warning him that I would hang up if he gave even the smallest hint to a spoiler, he told me that an episode in one of the previous seasons had reminded him of my research and the blogosphere in general and that he meant to ask if I was familiar with the series and whether I was interested in hearing his thoughts about it, but he had forgotten to do so.

As he was reminding me on Viber of the plot of that certain episode, a quick Google search on my laptop by using the English equivalents of some of the words Milad was speaking determined that the episode's title is *Blowing Smoke*, part of the season four of the show. The episode depicts a crisis in the newly founded advertising agency. The agency has lost its major client, Lucky Strike, a tobacco company, is not able to land new accounts, and is on the verge of bankruptcy. To improve the situation, without consulting other partners, Don Draper—the pensive, mysterious, and incredibly creative protagonist who is a founding partner of the agency—decides to do something, which in the eyes of others is nothing short of a business suicide. He writes an open letter stating that he is happy that his agency no longer advertises tobacco, a product killing customers. He then posts the letter as a full-page ad in the New York Times.

What interested Milad was the portrayal of writing in this certain episode, and, as I realized when we talked more, in the episodes leading to this one. Milad was one of the interlocutors with whom I had talked about the writing experience. Milad asked me if I noticed that before the open letter, Draper had developed the habit of writing his thoughts and memories in a journal. While the journal-keeping practice is meant to steady his mind after the death of a close friend, swimming and reducing alcohol consumption are

meant to help him improve his physical health. The therapeutic nature of writing was not unknown to bloggers. Milad remarked, “Before the New York Times letter, Draper was basically a blogger—with no actual readers of course. But he wrote for the same reasons many of us blog,” and added “but when he wanted to really do something, to write the letter and to change the fate of his failing advertising agency and himself, he ripped out his journal entries and threw them into the garbage.”

I could vividly remember the part of the plot with the New York Times open letter and all the rage it causes at the agency, but not the journal or its disposal. As we were talking, I searched YouTube and found a video of the episode. In the meantime, speculating where Milad’s argument is going, I asked him “Why should he throw the journal in the garbage?” He responded “Maybe because writing a journal is boring and uncreative. Don Draper is a cool guy [*ādam-e bāhāl*] and his character is all about his creativity (*xallāqīyat*). In fact, being creative *is* his job. He creates things. Probably the series’ creators wanted to show that writing a journal is out of character for Draper, and that when the time is right, he abandons the boring task of writing a memoir and emerges as the cool and creative person he truly is.”

I told him “That is very interesting. Let me write it down,” as I opened my note-taking application to document that I did not initially think would turn into an interesting conversation. I also told him about the video of the episode on YouTube and asked whether he minded if we took a quick look at the scenes he was describing, because it was a long time since I had last watched season four. He agreed. Since YouTube is banned inside Iran, I turned the Viber’s video chat feature on and held my phone facing my laptop’s screen so we could watch the clip together (figure 0.1).

Doing ethnographic fieldwork in the Persian blogosphere often involved using some of the tools and applications my interlocutors used and, with them, finding ways to get around the state-enforced bans on various websites and services. During my fieldwork, at times I also used my own blog as a research tool providing me with on-the-spot feedback. For example, with Milad's permission, I later posted what we had discussed on my blog⁵ so we could hear other bloggers' views on the issue too. Writing about other textual and visual media, including films, books, and TV series, is a popular topic for blogposts.

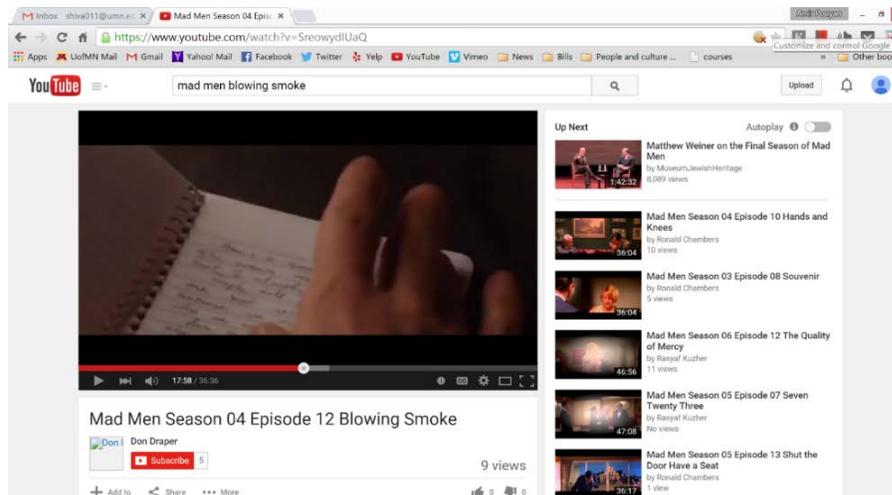


Figure 1. Doing ethnography online: watching with Milad the scene where Don Draper rips out his journal entries before he writes his open letter, Why I Am Quitting Tobacco, on a fresh page. YouTube Screenshot.

The main scene about which Milad talked lasted less than five seconds. I applauded him for his great observation skills. Being bloggers, my interlocutors were largely both excellent observers and outstanding describers of the world around them.

⁵ <https://goo.gl/EDC6Pb>

During my fieldwork, time and again I felt that my interlocutors were better ethnographers than I was. It was also often easy for me to describe for them what ethnography is and what I was doing in my research. Ethnographic research in fact resonated with them. After all, their practices of blogging frequently involved a form of participant-observation, informal conversation, photo documenting, and note-taking practices not unknown to ethnographers.

I told Milad, “You are right [...] What he did is totally in line with Draper’s character. He is a forward-looking guy. He is always creating new opportunities for himself. He once did it by changing his real identity [when he stole someone else’s identity and documents], because he hated his past and now he is doing the same thing by writing the letter.” Milad was in fact very keen in his observations. Draper was working on his identity in the midst of a personal and business crisis. As we shall see in this dissertation, particularly in chapter 3, this was basically what I had been observing in the Persian blogosphere: people facing crises of varied forms and degrees picked up blogging or changed the theme of their blogs to make sense of the world around them and to define who they were going to be in the aftermath of those crises. But it seems, for Draper, diary-keeping is not sufficient for crafting a self amidst personal crisis. It is true that he first picked up journaling to *find* himself. But then, disappointed at his passivity, he really dealt with the problem by discarding his diary. “That’s right,” said Milad in response to my statement and explained,

They [the series’ creators] want to tell us [the viewers] that nothing valuable can be created by writing a journal. It is like what I used to hear from my non-blogger friends and family: ‘Why do you waste your time blogging? Do something useful with your life.’ ‘You are a good writer; why don’t you use your talent to write a novel?’ ‘If you had spent that much time studying, you could have got two PhDs

by now!’ People think that only kids and the retired write journals. If you are of an age to work and produce something useful, you shouldn’t waste your time writing a memoir or journal (*zendegīnāme yā xāterāt*).

As we watched the video for a second time to see if we could find more details, I also noticed that for writing the letter, Draper goes through a meticulous process. After giving it a good thought while staring at his dead friend’s painting, he initially writes a handwritten draft on a fresh page in the journal before typing a first draft on his typewriter. He then carefully reads and revises the typed draft. We even see a shot of the page with actual mark-ups. The creators did whatever they could to convince the viewers that the letter is a well-thought, serious piece of writing with real-world consequences. Since most of journal-writing scenes take place in the previous episodes, I asked Milad whether he remembered if Draper puts this kind of effort in writing his journal entries. “Of course not! That’s the whole point. Journal writing must be straight-forward and non-consequential (*sāde o bīahamīyat*),” responded Milad. Writing the strategic, consequential open letter seems to be intentionally depicted as the opposite of diary-keeping.

Milad’s observation of the scene in *Mad Men* and mapping it on the non-bloggers’ understanding of the practice allude to a particular interpretation of the function of writing. In this dissertation, and specifically in chapter 5, I look more closely at different understandings of the function and process of writing under the rubric of *regimes of writing*. In this episode of *Mad Men*, writing is considered to be valuable only if it *does something* by changing concrete things in real world. However, the point is that although in this understanding the value of writing seems to rest in goals it helps achieve, as we shall see in chapters 4 and 5, it is in fact deemed valuable only when it, on its own,

does nothing; when it instead merely reflects the everlasting qualities of the writer and efficiently conveys his or her will. In Milad's example of *Mad Men*, the effective, valuable writing for the New York Times helps Don Draper's strong personality, his creativity, and well-thought plans to be efficiently communicated to the world out there. What the show creators want the viewers to understand is that the act of creativity belongs to Draper rather than the open letter. The letter only reflects the writer's creativity; it does not—in and of itself—create.

In Milad's view, a variety of this understanding manifests itself in the above-mentioned episode of *Mad Men* since it contrasts two types of writing: (1) writing a journal, which does not need to be thought out and whose humble goal which it actually cannot fulfill after all is to steady the writer, and (2) writing a strategic, effective, and even deceitful open letter whose goal is to achieve a well-planned business advantage. While the former revolves around the self and is pointed *inward*, the latter is written for others and looks *outward*. Also, while the former is thought to be directed towards one's *past* troubled personal history, the latter looks forward to creating *future* business opportunities. Finally, while the former is thought to be *unaffected*, the latter is deliberately *constructed* and worked on. As a result, whereas the former is a reflection that creates nothing new since, at best, it only fixes an already-made self, the latter creates new opportunities as it seeks to change the world outside. In other words, according to the dominant view, when writing is untouched, directed inward, and towards the past, it is not considered to achieve anything in the real world and is therefore eventually futile and worthless—a waste of time, as those who criticized Milad for blogging reminded him.

In this view, blogging—at least the self-centering, non-commercial, non-overtly-political type I studied during my fieldwork—as Milad noticed, mostly falls under the first category because, although as I will show it is not true, it is deemed to achieve nothing concrete and significant. This negative view of blogging is advocated in—ironically—a blogpost written by Daryoush Ashouri, an Iranian intellectual who is known among educated Iranians for translating several of Nietzsche’s books into Persian, as well as for making Persian equivalents for philosophical and sociological jargons.

In that blogpost,⁶ Ashouri writes that his lack of interest in reading other blogs is the result of the fact that he “has always been looking for serious and useful material to read.” He continues that he does not understand “the purpose of this way of frittering away time” and consequently cannot help but express grief because it seems “some smart and shrewd friends who are otherwise good writers do nothing more.” By ‘more’ he probably means using their writing to achieve concrete, real-world goals: “Tasks that fit their much higher capabilities whose place is not in a blog.” Adding that his lack of interest may be the result of generational differences, he denigrates blogging by calling it a form of entertainment (*tafannonī*) but still by mentioning the number of the visitors to his site implicitly acknowledges the importance of the medium due to its popularity (figure 0.2). Later in this dissertation, I will discuss the mixed feeling of Iranian traditional intellectuals towards blogging: they use the medium, but do not think highly of it; they like it because they can get more audience, but they do not consider it to achieve any serious goals.

⁶ Ashouri declines to call his website a blog. He starts the same blogpost by writing that in his view, his page is a website, not a blog and that it will never turn into a blog.



Figure 1.2A screenshot of Daryoush Ashouri’s blogpost titled “Another Hello,” from October 4, 2004, in his blog, Jostar. <https://goo.gl/YUs19s>

For Ashouri, blogging is not serious and achieves little, because its production is devoid of the meticulous process, “rules, and norms” of other types of professional writing.⁷ These rules and the meticulous process that is required to go into the craft of writing make a piece of writing valuable mainly by ensuring that writing and thought are not concurrent or even worse that writing does not precede thought. I will discuss in the following chapters the implications of a practice of writing where the idea about which one writes does not precede writing itself. For now, it is worth noting that in the Western philosophy, the rejection of discourses in which the ideas come after the material expression of the same ideas goes back to Plato’s *Gorgias* where an appropriate discourse “is primarily an organism that unfolds (it has a “plan”), and it is articulated (for Plato one has to know how to “divide it up”) (Cassin, 2014, p. 87). In this tradition the discourses in which “sense is created as the enunciation goes along” (Cassin, 2014, p. 89) is stigmatized. Therefore, there exist concerns when *ex tempore* (linked to *Kairos*) with its

⁷ <http://goo.gl/KieK6k>

autotelic possibilities is considered as equally important as *topos* with which “we have the *telos* and all we have to do is follow the predetermined route” (Cassin, 2014, p. 94).

Expanding on Milad’s observation, Draper’s letter-writing, unlike his journal-keeping, is valuable because it is thoughtful. Before Draper starts the letter, we see that he stares at the painting and deeply thinks presumably about the ideas he wants to later put in the letter. This is to assure us (the viewers) that a lot of thinking has gone into the writing of the strategic open letter later published in the New York Times.

1-3- A POLITICAL PARALLEL

Buzzkillers, *zedd-e hāl*, is the word Shadi, another informant, used in a conversation to describe the type of writers and commentators such as Ashouri. Buzzkillers of the Persian blogosphere may be traditional intellectuals, like Ashouri, who used to have the sole right to production of meaning for the public. Now that, thanks to blogging, they have lost that status, they at times engage in activities to delegitimize ordinary people’s practices of writing. I will show in chapter 3 that traditional intellectuals, in spite of what one may expect, try to silence bloggers, sometimes by writing blogposts in which ordinary people’s blogging is portrayed as a public problem. In these blogposts written by buzzkillers, seemingly simple problems like not following the accepted rules of writing for a public audience, including the laws for logical reasoning and grammatical and orthographical rules are portrayed as symptoms of a more serious problem. As such, ordinary bloggers and their writing are turned into a subject for moral panic. Describing some of these delegitimizing techniques, I will show that attempts to silence others take

place in tandem with the democratic qualities, including the egalitarian distribution of power, for which the Internet (because of its intentionally horizontal design), in general, and the Persian blogosphere, in particular, are celebrated.

When it comes to the larger political picture, the Iranian government tries to control or oppress both traditional intellectuals (some of whom are not able to publish their work legally inside Iran and as a result use blogging as an accessible outlet) and ordinary bloggers (some of whom end up receiving jail sentences for the content of their blogs). But this picture, in which the government is the only censoring force repressing the voice of those who disagree with its ideologies and policies, does not tell us the whole story of power dynamics in the Persian blogosphere and beyond. In addition to the government's prosecution of some bloggers and intellectuals, there are further struggles of power taking place, among others, between traditional intellectuals and ordinary bloggers—the two groups that are implicitly or explicitly, actively or accidentally, fighting for and advancing the same democratic values. I will discuss this point further in chapter 3, but I think an anecdote from an event outside the scope of my field research that took place while writing my dissertation sheds some light on the issue at hand. Although it is not related to my field site of the Persian blogosphere, this anecdote depicts a more general issue in the field of Internet studies of which my discussion of struggles of power in the Persian blogosphere is an instance.

Days after the July 15, 2016 attempted coup in Turkey, in a hurried act of retaliation that went awry, WikiLeaks made public some 300,000 emails, falsely dubbed AKP (the Justice and Development Party) or Erdoğan emails. In the aftermath of the failed coup,

the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan administration and allies overreacted to the plot by not only arresting responsible military personnel, but also firing academics and officials and cracking down on schools and newspapers. In reaction to these post-coup measures designed to reinforce Erdoğan's power, the leaked emails were hoped to expose information pointing toward corruption in the ruling AKP administration. In response to the email dump, the Information and Communication Technologies Authority, the Internet governance body in Turkey, banned access to the WikiLeaks website. Many took the state's reaction as a sign that the intended retaliation hit the target, because if the emails had not contained critical information, the government would have not bothered blocking access to the site. The National Security Agency whistleblower, Edward Snowden, for instance, tweeted a link to a Reuters news piece titled "Turkey blocks access to WikiLeaks after ruling party email dump"⁸ with the comment "how to authenticate a leak."⁹

However, as Zenyep Tufekci, a digital sociologist who in her writings has always openly criticized the Turkish government's ban on the Internet, writes in the Huffington Post¹⁰ the emails did not reveal any important information and were not in fact composed by the AKP officials. More importantly, making the emails available online specifically put many ordinary Turkish women in danger, for buried in the emails was a path to access a spreadsheet containing the private information of almost all female voters in Turkey. If one was an AKP member, the person's national identification number was also

⁸ <http://goo.gl/03CUX8>

⁹ <https://goo.gl/jb3i44>

¹⁰ <http://goo.gl/XZeRYu>

listed in the spreadsheet. Although she did not share how to access the spreadsheet due to obvious security and safety concerns, Tufekci was able to retrieve it through the leaked emails. As she mentions in the same Huffington Post article, this was an irresponsible dump of leaked emails by WikiLeaks; because, for instance, random stalkers or abusive ex-partners able to access the spreadsheet through the emails can retrieve the current address and phone number of their potential victims. In other words, the privacy of ordinary citizens was violated and people were put in risk for no good reason as the emails revealed nothing of importance about those in power. The leak was insignificant and for it the safety of ordinary citizens was jeopardized.

The story did not end here, though. When Tufekci took issue with the WikiLeaks email dump and replied to the above-mentioned Snowden tweet, many Twitter users questioned her intentions and among other things accused her of supporting the oppressive government of Turkey (of which she has been very critical). The struggle still did not stop there, and it went beyond the realm of Turkish politics when some of Bernie Sanders supporters, started to pick on her and delegitimized her argument and findings by calling her a Hillary Clinton backer. Although initially it may seem to be an unreasonable, random accusation as the topics and geographies of the leaked emails (AKP, Turkey) and the accusations (Democratic Party, USA) were irrelevant, those Sanders supporters could see a link between the two, for Tufekci published the Huffington Post article and replied to Snowden's tweet around the time when the Democratic National Committee (DNC) emails were also exposed by WikiLeaks. Those emails revealed that the DNC—which was expected to remain impartial during the course of primaries—sided with Hillary Clinton and was biased against Bernie Sanders. Those

Sanders supporters did not see this as a simple coincidence and assumed that Tufekci's criticism of WikiLeaks would destroy the significance of all of the organization's undertakings and will offset the DNC leaks. Ironically, a few days after some Sanders supporters tried to silence Tufekci on Twitter, some other Sanders supporters in Philadelphia where the party's convention took place, symbolically wore tape over their mouths as a sign of being silenced. Actually, in one case, written on the tape was the word "silenced" and the supporter had held a flyer that read: "This is what democracy looks like" (figure 0.3). In addition to these accusations, WikiLeaks also called Tufekci an "Erdoğan apologist," blocked her access to the organization's Twitter account,¹¹ and threatened that if she did not "correct the record" they would file an official complaint with Huffington Post.

Tufekci is a known Internet studies scholar who has always openly criticized the ruling Turkish government for its attempts to limit access to the Internet. She has frequently written about the significance of citizen journalism in Turkey and in a New York Times opinion piece, writing from inside Turkey in the midst of the attempted coup, she describes Erdoğan as an Internet-hating President.¹² In other words, it seems that Tufekci and WikiLeaks both fight for the similar liberal rights and democratic values and against the same tyrannical restrictions.

However, it is an error to reduce the struggles of power to one between the silencing undemocratic governments on the one hand and the advocates of freedom of speech on the other. As it is clear from this anecdote, there is another usually overlooked

¹¹ <https://goo.gl/9J2nV3>

¹² <http://goo.gl/lcuoUy>

struggle of power among those who fight the same fight. Perceiving its authority as the pioneer organization protecting the interest of people in the face of tyrannical governments in jeopardy, WikiLeaks attempted to silence a scholar who shares similar democratic ideals but was critical of the method WikiLeaks used. At the same time WikiLeaks criticized a government for blocking users' access, the organization ironically blocked Tufekci's access to its own Twitter account. Also, while they felt silenced by their own political party, some Democrats tried to silence Tufekci, a fellow citizen. This struggle of power among those who seemingly pursue the same objectives indicates that democratic values of openness and freedom are fought in tandem with using repressive methods against those who similarly fight for the same democratic values. There seems to be an underlying discourse of authoritarianism at work even among groups supporting democracy. Although an open, free platform, like Twitter, provides everyone with an opportunity to voice his or her opinion, it does not magically eliminate the question of power. It conversely and for the exact same reason may create new struggles of power.

The Persian blogosphere similarly reconfigured the power structure in Iran. It, however, did not eliminate the question of power as new struggles over power were formed with its arrival. As we shall see in this dissertation, during my fieldwork in the Persian blogosphere, it often happened that traditional intellectuals, who in many cases identify themselves as champions of freedom of speech, delegitimized ordinary bloggers who practiced their right to openly share their opinion, for blogging had taken away the intellectuals' role as the sole producers of meaning for the public. The Bernie Sanders supporter and my informants would probably share the same feeling: in the platforms in which they were engaged, the Democratic Party or the Persian blogosphere, democratic

values are sometimes defended at the expense of silencing others. Indeed “this is what democracy looks like,” as the sign of that Sanders supporter reads.



Figure 1.3 Bernie Sanders supporter wearing a tape over her mouth saying silenced. Still captured from <https://goo.gl/E8nHqN>

1-4- THE PERILS OF SIMULTANEITY

Let me leave the discussion of struggles over power in the Persian blogosphere and the US Twitter sphere for the time being, and go back to the reasons for which blogging is thought by the buzzkillers to be an inferior form of writing—a reason for them to criticize the practice or justify silencing others. As we saw in Milad’s description of blogging, many professional writers in Iran think blogging is an inferior form of writing when compared to a more calculated writing which is thought to be the superior form of the practice. As part of my fieldwork, I participated in authoring a Writing Skills (*negāreš*) book that complements the official student textbooks in Iran. I will discuss my

participant-observation briefly in chapter 5. As we shall see, technical, strategic, and fully planned writing is the form that official Writing Skills textbooks teach to Iranian students. As such, the requirements of this form of writing help shape the dominant canonical form of writing in the country.

Writing education enjoys a rich history in Iran. Strategic writing, the carefully-thought and calculated writing that, like a well-designed tool serves a particular purpose, is a form that is exalted in the Iranian literary history. Most famously, the first chapter of the 12th century text, *Chahār Maqāle* (Four Discourses) of the Persian poet and prose writer Nezāmī Arūzī, titled “on the essence of the Secretarial Art, and the nature of the perfect Secretary and what is connected therewith” (Aruzi of Samarghand, 1921, p. 12) describes the qualities of scribes or secretaries (*dabīr*), a class of bureaucrats without whom no kingdom will last. Reminiscent of Weber’s description of the import of writing in a bureau (Weber, 1978, p. 957), a *dabīr*’s job ensures the order of the realm.¹³ According to Arūzī, the scribe is in charge of writing strategic texts, including official correspondence and legal opinions, the finest of which are succinct, guiding the reader quickly to their clear points (p. 13). These qualities manifest themselves in the craft of

¹³ It is how Arūzī describes the qualities of a secretary which also speaks to the requirements of strategic writing: “Hence, the Secretary must be of gentle birth, of refined honour, of penetrating discernment, of profound reflection, and of piercing judgement; and the amplest portion and fullest share of literary culture and its fruits must be his. Neither must he be remote from, or unacquainted with, logical ‘analogies; and he must know the ranks of his contemporaries, and be familiar with the dignities of the leading men of his time. Moreover, he should not be absorbed in the wealth and perishable goods of this world; nor concern himself with the approval or condemnation of persons prejudiced in his favour or against him; or be misled by them; and he should, when exercising his secretarial functions, guard the honour of his master from degrading situations and humiliating usages. And in the course of his letter and tenour of his correspondence he should not quarrel with honourable and powerful personages; and, even though enmity subsist between his master and the person whom he is addressing, he should restrain his pen, and not attack his honour, save in the case of one who may have, overstepped his own proper limit, or advanced his foot beyond the circle of respect, for they say: “One for one, and he who begins is most in the wrong” (Aruzi of Samarghand, 1921, p. 13)

scribes who could “compress into two sentences, the ideas of two worlds” (p. 19) to produce letters for whose description “a thousand volumes or even more might be written,” yet their “purport is extremely plain and clear, needing no explanation” (p. 25). These writings are, moreover, characterized by order and manipulation in form of strategically magnifying and minimizing matters (p. 12). As such, they require meticulous thinking and a careful selection of words, because if scribes do not think carefully about what they plan to write, the arrows of their thought “will fly wide and will not be concentrated on the target of achievement” (p. 18).

Strategic writings are, therefore, heavily contemplated, require planning, and must not be composed spontaneously or without reflection. An anecdote in *Chahār Maqāle* recounting the story of a secretary of the Abbasid caliphs may illustrate the damages of spontaneity and co-occurrence of writing and thought. The anecdote goes that as the secretary was writing a letter whose sentences were “precious as pearls of great price and fluent as running water,” the scribe’s maid interrupted him reporting “there is no flour left” at home. The scribe mindlessly puts down the maid’s exact words in the letter which has already reached the caliph’s hands (p. 18). Although Arūzī brings up the anecdote to primarily underline the importance of secretaries’ welfare and decent pay, so they never run out of basic goods, it also equally alludes to the significance of precedence of thoughts over their expression, for the maid’s announcement which disturbed the scribe’s mind and let itself in the letter stresses the dangers of simultaneity of writing and thought. When the secretary’s thought was disrupted, the disruption was reflected in his writing and violated its purpose. Any external, disruptive force interfering with the internal thought process should therefore be avoided in this form of writing, which still today

dominates people's understanding of the appropriate form of writing as it is perpetuated in formal school education.

The precedence of thought over writing is a topic that I discuss in more detail in chapter 5 where I will show that this issue is usually decided in regimes of writing—a conceptual term through which I also work out the relationship between the self and writing. In the same chapter, I discuss a practice of writing in the Persian blogosphere in which ideas reveal themselves to the writer after their physical expression on the computer display; a practice of producing ideas not by avoiding disruption, but by welcoming it in the form of written words displayed on the monitor.

Discussing this practice, in another conversation, Milad recited and repurposed a quote from Shams-e Tabrizi, Rumi's spiritual instructor, that I have cited in the epigraph to this introduction: "It's the sea's habit. It swallows one until one is drowned and dead. After one is drowned and dead, the sea raises and carries one." The quote in its original context alludes to *fanā*, or annihilation in the beloved, the last stage (*vādī*) of love in Sufi mysticism. But for Milad, it took on a new *secular* meaning.¹⁴ No longer indicating the only true beloved, God, the sea in the quote served as a metaphor for his own written

¹⁴ It seems that Milad's so-called secular understanding of the quote and its original mystic intention may be one and the same, if we think about it in terms that Benjamin suggests: "God rested when he had left his creative power to itself in man. This creativity, relieved of its divine actuality, became knowledge. Man is the knower in the same language in which God is creator" (1996, p. 323). One becomes God in the stage of *fanā*. The 9th and 10th century Persian mystic, Mansur Hallaj, famously proclaimed "I am the Truth" (*anal haq*) and "There is nothing wrapped in my turban but God" (*mā fi jobbatī ellalāh*). As one becomes God, one acquires godly abilities, including the divine creativity (*xallāqīyat*). Remember that creativity, in its *secular* meaning, was at the heart of Milad's argument about the Mad Men scene. Interestingly, as he was complaining about the state's cultural policies affecting his job as a marketing specialist, Milad in yet another conversation said that the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance once banned a street billboard their company had designed for Sony because they had translated the first part of Sony's "make.believe" brand strategy as "*xalq konīd*"—from the same root as *xallāqīyat*, creativity. The ministry justified the ban by arguing *xalq kardan* is an act unique to God.

words. Milad said when he was writing, he sometimes let the sea of words (*daryāy-e kalamāt*) drown him: “I do not think. I just let words come to me and cover me (*bīyān sorāqam o mano bepūšūnan*). I write them down until I’m sunk in my own written words. I write down whatever that comes to me. It’s when I am completely drowned [in this sea of words], that I feel I can think clearly (*xūb fekr konam*). I then feel I am saying what I should have said but was not able to see before writing it.”

I will momentarily return to my conversation with Milad. But before that, I would like to add that, to me, personally, his use of the quote was striking and his interpretation of it was remarkable. In fact, a probably peripheral personal advantage of my research was that it served to me as a reminder that we, Iranians, love to draw on literature to make sense of our experiences. When reviewing my field notes, I realized how frequently my informants used verses of poems not only to illustrate their arguments but to prove their points. My research helped me rediscover a fact that I had forgotten: our literature thinks for us.

1-5- THE PEIRCEAN DISRUPTION OF TYPED WORDS

“The experience of effort, prescindend from the idea of a purpose,”(Peirce, CP 8.330) is one of several ways Peirce describes secondness, which, I think, can also explain the specificity of writing practices of which Milad’s account is an example. Without going too much into details, it suffices to say that firstness, secondness, and thirdness are a structure describing degrees of mediation and comprise categories that represent a “table of conceptions drawn from the logical analysis of thought and regarded as applicable to

being” (Peirce, CP 1.300). Describing an un-reflexive (or pre-reflexive) access, firstness indicates the quality of feeling, an absence of analysis or comparison (Peirce, CP 1.306). Alluding to a mediated but not yet reflexive access, secondness involves an actual other and the recognition of it as other. While secondness is about reactions and relations, thirdness implies representation and mediation (a mediated access). It is important to Peirce’s theory that the triad of firstness, secondness, and thirdness is nested in that the higher degrees cannot exist without the lower ones. Important to my argument and understanding of media is that Peirce’s theory implies that mediation is always dependent on immediacy.¹⁵

In the practices of writing like that of Milad, bloggers start with typing words, phrases, or sentences that occur to them when they are virtually idle or purposeless, to some extent similar to the state of mind which Peirce asks his reader to imagine: “Imagine yourself to be seated alone at night in the basket of a balloon, far above earth, calmly enjoying the absolute calm and stillness” (Peirce, CP 8.330). This state of calmness where one lets only one thing to occupy one’s thought is similar to the state of mind in which Milad supposedly was when he left himself in the hands of words (“*xodam ro be dast-e kalamāt mīsporam*”). Another verb he used to describe this state was *rahā kardan*, to abandon (or indulge), which indicates freedom (not because one has control over the situation as in ‘I am free because I can do whatever I want’, but inversely because one has no control and therefore feels no responsibility) and consequently the

¹⁵ This is in line with Walter Benjamin’s (1996) theory of language in *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*, which has been rarely interpreted as a media theory (for an exception look at, (Krämer, 2015)). For Benjamin (1996, p. 64), “mediation [...] is the immediacy of all mental communication.”

state of tranquility resulting from this sense of freedom. Milad told me that: “Shams [in the quote] says that you have to abandon yourself to the sea and let it drown and kill you. When you are your everyday self (*xod-e har-rūze-at*), with one thousand and one [countless] thoughts and concerns (*bā hezār o yek fekr o xīyāl*), the sea won’t raise you (*bolandet nemikone*). It does not carry you to where you can look around and see the world around you clearly.”

The words that occur to the blogger may be ones that she had learned to copy back in first grade. Similarly, the sentences that set this practice of writing into motion may be the exact words that literally captured (*gereftan*, in Persian, which indicates the passivity of the person who was overpowered by those words) her when she read them somewhere. Being “a non-ego” (Peirce, CP 8.330), these powerful, penetrating words appearing on the display in the written form (after all, if not powerful in one way or another, how did they find their way to the display; how did they capture the blogger?), involve an experience, an *affect* of some sorts, causing a reaction—just like when Peirce’s reader, sitting in the basket of the balloon, suddenly hears “the piercing shriek of a steam-whistle” (Peirce, CP 8.330). This is secondness that disrupts. Peirce describes secondness as an actuality. As we will see later in this dissertation and as Milad’s use of the sea metaphor shows, these words or sentences are usually overfull (if not, how are they capable of drowning the blogger?) and characterized with a surplus or excess of possibilities that requires a selection among the possible meanings they suggest (Massumi, 2002, p. 30). The selection takes place in the editor window of the blogging interface where the blogger types, deletes, retypes, and undoes the delete action.

As a result, the blogger is compelled to think, articulate, express, and formulate—in other words to represent. It is when “thirdness comes in” (Peirce, CP 8.330). As the blogger starts to reflect on the experience, an initial lack of specific purpose (idleness of playing with the keyboard) is now turned into purpose and consequently, meaning emerges. Therefore, meaning—and the newness of it—at least in these cases is the result of an encounter with the non-ego, non-self words in their material form on the display and not simply thinking ideas, like in the *Mad Men* scene where Draper contemplates ideas before putting them into words of the open letter. Words on the display are overfull and powerful, like Shams-e Tabrizi’s sea, capable of drowning the writer and then raising her to a vantage point from which she looks at her life and *finds* herself. The stories the blogger tells from that vantage point and her self are then two modalities of one reality. In chapter 3, I discuss the importance of this vantage point and the stories told from this point of view in the creation of the self. But it is important to note that these meaningful stories are dependent on that *meaningless* sea of words, just like in the Peircean theory where thirdness cannot exist without secondness and firstness. In other words, finding one’s self becomes possible when one loses oneself in that sea. The self is impossible without the non-self. Similarly, the human self these stories create is dependent on the non-human technology of blogging (Section 1-6). As such, the equivalence of the two—i.e., the blogger and her stories—which the majority of studies on the Persian blogosphere takes for granted is problematized when a third (the *meaningless* language or the *non-human* technology) is taken into account (figure 0.4).

The practice of writing in which ideas, meanings, intentions, and purposes come after their material expression (or better, the *experience* of their material expression) has

implications for sincerity, especially in the Persian blogosphere where people both within and outside the community expect it to be a place where true interiorities of the blogger, her feelings, intentions, and thoughts are put *into* words. Words are therefore considered to be neither overfull nor powerful, just neutral carriers of the blogger’s ideas. Like what Milad said when describing the Mad Men scene, it is the blogger who is thought to be overfull (and therefore creative, or *xallāq*) and powerful in expressing her ideas and feelings. When written words displayed on the monitor are overfull enough to force the blogger to select among meanings or powerful enough to *fabricate* those thoughts for the blogger and in return create her *interiority*, or in other words, when immaterial ideas follow material words, the situation is construed as a case of insincerity and inauthenticity. As we shall see, the *fabrication* of the self, however, involves *fabrications*, lies.

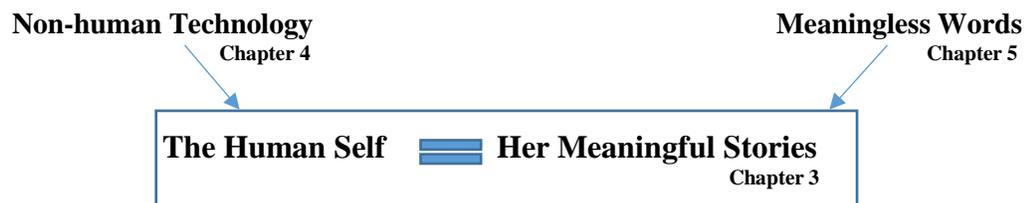


Figure 1.4 Non-human technology and meaningless words both undergird and undermine the equivalence of humans and their stories.

The following chapters will, moreover, show that blogging, and the practices of writing it encourages altered my informants’ relation to signifiers—to written words. My informants’ blogging did not follow the principles of planned, strategic writing they had learned in their Writing Skills classes where they were taught meaning is paramount and writing is simply a tool to convey to the reader ideas that are effectively transformed into

words. While blogging, in their everyday experience and encounter with and use of written words, an expectation for disruption (like the disruption of idleness by material words) took precedence over an obsession with meaning. Blogging was not the only place one might observe this transformation (or return of the repressed) in the relation between the self and the signifier in contemporary Iran. Other manifestations of this new appreciation for disruption causes one to believe that perhaps this transformation (from meaning to disruption) patterns the ethos of the era when blogging was flourishing in Iran.

1-6- A VISUAL PARALLEL

Let me again consider an example that falls outside the scope of my field research, but speaks to a trend of which my findings in the Persian blogosphere are an instance. Since later in this dissertation I discuss doodling (*xatxatī kardan*), a drawing-related metaphor, Iranian bloggers utilized to describe a practice of writing in which meaning came afterward, let me briefly illustrate my point about a new appreciation for disruption by quickly considering a similar shift in graphic design (and particularly typography) in Iran taking place during the same period.¹⁶ In short, although I risk generalizing, during the years when blogging was enormously popular in Iran, a new trend within Iranian graphic design and typography also became popular. Instead of an obsession with message and

¹⁶ One may see a similar shift in a broader range of cultural production, from popular music (e.g., Mohsen Namjoo's music) to *nohe* (e.g., Abdolreza Helali's laments), a specific genre of Shi'a lament about the tragedy of Karbala.

meaning, this trend preferred visual disruption of the audience's field of view to the extent that at times the message was obscured.

A pioneer, prominent figure in this style of contemporary design is Reza Abedini whose work in post-digital graphic design is now nationally and internationally celebrated. In an interview,¹⁷ Abedini mentions that when he first started to apply this approach to the design of book covers, publishing houses required him to guarantee that his work would not impair the sale of books, because in his designs the book titles on covers were not easily readable. He was asked to literally deposit checks that would be cashed in case his cover art harmed book sales. A poster designed for a book exhibition in 2000¹⁸, in my view, epitomizes Abedini's work and his style of design. Viewers reasonably expect to see the message of the campaign in the large title centered on the top of the poster. However, as it is probably obvious even to those unfamiliar with the Persian language, although the large title is where the message is located, the overlapping letters have made it virtually illegible. The same is true, although to a lesser degree, about the smaller titles where the uncharacteristic letter-spacing (tracking) has reduced the legibility of the text by much.

Message that once used to be the primary focus of the previous generation of works of graphic design in Iran became secondary in the process because this new style, no longer a simple vehicle for message, was focused on the disruption of the field of vision. Borrowing from Barthes's (1981) photographic terms, while the older style was concerned with the message that is of the order of *studium*, the new type is all about the

¹⁷ <https://goo.gl/FHirHz>

¹⁸ I do not reproduce the poster here, but it is available at this address: <https://goo.gl/JCMzcc>.

disruption of the viewer's mind by primarily including "an element which rises from the scene" (Barthes, 1981, p. 26). As such, *punctum*,¹⁹ that disturbs and sticks with the viewer (cf. Ahmed, 2010) is the main concern of this mode of design. Not as much the accessibility and readability of the message but the materiality of type and the letters' tendency to be arranged in specific ways in relation to other letters, a propensity passed down from traditional *nasta'liq* calligraphy to this contemporary typeface, directed the typography in a seemingly counterintuitive approach. Pronouncing the work of this new generation of designers mesmerizing, a 2010 New York Times article correctly points out that "they utilize Farsi script as imagery, rather than simply as type."²⁰

Once perceived as a potential threat to the sale of books due to the illegibility of titles, this approach suddenly caught on and became ubiquitous in various media and forms and changed the landscape of contemporary design in Iran. Like the majority of Iranian bloggers, the majority of designers of this fashion had also grown up in the post-Revolution Iran. This shared tendency toward disruption may explain why this style of graphic design found a natural ally in the Persian blogosphere. The logos of several blogs and 'online magazines' (which in fact were collective blogs or a community of bloggers writing in one place—in these online magazines—in addition to their own blogs) were heavily influenced by this trend of graphic design. The logo of *Parvande* (figure 0.5), one of these collective efforts, was in fact designed by Abedini. Again, in the design of the logo, the title of the e-magazine that is generally accepted to be the most important

¹⁹ In addition to disturbing (p. 41), breaking, punctuating, piercing, shooting (p. 26), pricking, bruising (p. 27), and wounding (p. 41), all associated with Peircean secondness, are other verbs Barthes uses to describe *punctum*.

²⁰ <https://goo.gl/j9RxqM>

message the logo is supposed to convey, has been rendered practically unreadable thanks to overlapping letters and the use of their improper form in relation of their position.



Figure 1.5A screenshot of the first page of the now-defunct online-magazine (in the format of a collective blog), Parvande (<https://goo.gl/WGizVK>) whose logo, again virtually illegible, was designed by Reza Abedini.

This shift in graphic design, especially when it comes to typography, is a movement in the opposite direction of what Messick (1993) argues in his ethnography in the case of modernization of Yemeni documents, from traditional difficult-to-read spiral documents to accessible, straight texts. In spiraling documents, Messick (1993, p. 237) maintains, form and content developed together as no predefined formal constraints, beyond that of page-size, determined the content of the text. In my discussion of doodling, a drawing-related concept, as a metaphor used by bloggers for writing, I will argue for the presence of a co-developmental relation in the Persian blogosphere, in some ways similar but not identical to that of Yemeni spiraling documents—a relation between

content and form that brings up the anxiety associated with the perceived threats of simultaneity of thought and writing and its implications for insincerity. The question of modernity, not in terms far removed from Messick's argument, that links it to planning (and again, the anxiety associated with lack thereof), also figures in the following chapters as well as in the next section of the introduction.

1-7- THE MACHINE

The precedence of the material expression of thought in form of written words over the thought itself (or the co-development of the two) may be deemed to be a sign of inauthenticity as external words disrupt and help shape the internal self. But it is not the whole story. What if not only the written words but also the technology with whose help those words are written takes part in fashioning the self?

In a historically and culturally different background from that of the Arūzī story (section 1-3) promoting the welfare of secretaries, in 1983 John Updike, seemingly oblivious to his secretary's welfare, dismissed her as soon as he got a word processor (Kirschenbaum, 2016, p. 167). Replacing the secretary with a word processor had its consequences on Updike's writing as the adoption of the new technological tool, the Wang, changed his writing (Kirschenbaum, 2016, pp. 86-87).

The machine-induced change is, however, not limited to the content of writing as it may also include its form—such as orthography—too. As I was researching the impact of computer typing on writing in Iran to contextualize the effect of blogging as a technological medium, I came across a photo of Ahmad Shamlou, one of Iran's most

celebrated contemporary poets, taken in 1369 [1990-1991]. The photo²¹ depicts the poet behind his work desk on which in addition to an ashtray and his glasses, a few pages of loose paper and a package of 3½-inch floppy disks cover an embroidered tablecloth. On the desk there also exists an IBM-compatible desktop computer running *Zarnegār*, one of the very first pre-WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) Microsoft DOS-operated Persian word processing programs.²² It is believed that Shamlou's use of *Zarnegār* to type his poems, notes, articles, and translations was one of the reasons why he joined in founding the Council for Revision of Persian Orthography (*šorā-ye bāznegārī dar šīve-ye negāreš va xatt-e fārsī*), a group of high profile writers, linguists, and intellectuals who met regularly to, among other things, make Persian orthography compatible with software standards. Without standardization of the Persian orthography users could not effectively search within Persian digital texts. Also, scanned texts could not be universally OCRed (Optical Character Recognition).²³

The council suggested changes to Persian orthography, both in the handwritten and typed forms, to make Persian writing less messy, more homogenous, and as a result more machine-compatible. These adjustments to Persian speakers' writing habits meant to facilitate the work of computer software which preferred standardized orthography for its optimum functioning. With these changes, computer applications could effortlessly

²¹ This one of the kind photo is available here <https://goo.gl/yBqkSl>. It depicts the Iranian poet, Ahmad Shamlou, behind his work desk. *Zarnegār*, an MS DOS-based word processing software is running on the PC in the background. The photo is most likely taken in 1990 or 1991 (1369). I could not find who the photographer is.

²² There is also another photo available from Shamlou working on a computer (<https://goo.gl/oZjF1t>). This other undated picture depicts him in profile actually typing on a keyboard. But it does not show the computer display. In the background of the picture there is a dot matrix printer, very similar to the Epson LQ series vastly popular in Iran in the 1990s.

²³ <https://goo.gl/g5hfPM>

recognize non-digital writing and flawlessly search within digital documents. Instead of working on the software so it can recognize the varied, messy ways Persian speakers naturally wrote, users were guided to write in a way that the machine preferred. The Council's suggestions, that were partially picked up by the Persian Academy and were later formally standardized in the official Persian orthography or *dastūr-e xatt-e fārsī*,²⁴ reveals a general tendency where human users become machine-like in their interaction with machines—similar to callers speaking robot-like on the phone so voice recognition software understands them.

Although in science fiction the opposite is usually feared, it seems that human users are being trained to think, talk, and write like machines. Alan Turing who notably developed a test to determine if computer intelligence is indistinguishable from that of human beings, believed that the consequences of programming is not known in advance. In response to objections that computers do not think as they only follow instructions, he wrote that “machines take me by surprise with great frequency” (cited in: Chun, 2008, p. 227). This evaluation seems to be equally true about humans. Prior to their sustained interaction with machines, possible changes in human behavior resulted from that interaction (including those related to writing) cannot be known. With changes in technology, users also change in surprising ways to adapt to the conditions of tools. Scholars in the field of Software Studies have long argued that the user, “with certain rights, abilities, and limits is constructed” (Pold, 2008, p. 219) by the software and her powers are set up and negotiated within the interface (cf. Fuller, 2003).

²⁴ <https://goo.gl/FKWfQg>

In the case of typing in Persian by using computer software, the chain of machine-induced changes does not, however, end at the level of orthography. In an effort to get rid of the messiness of traditional Persian orthography,²⁵ in part imposed by the requirements of the machine, educated Iranians started to think about and use a more standardized writing system and in the process their identity as *modern* citizens were formed or reinforced. Financial *efficacy* of digital publishing grounded in a consistent, uniform orthography, linguistic *precision* of a homogenous writing system, and educational *value* of a standard, uncomplicated spelling system were among the reasons that required the change in orthography.

In addition, the Council, an independent establishment that in its collaboration with conceivably the most influential literary periodical in contemporary Iran, *Ādīne*, initiated the change, set an example for modern citizenship in post-revolutionary Iran; a citizenship that was not dependent on the state's decisions for problem-solving. As independent citizens, the members of the Council took it on themselves to come up with solutions for an issue they perceived as nationally important. Seeing the amount and quality of work the Council had achieved, the Persian Academy, a governmental body, later asked for the advice of the Council. Then in meetings with the representative of the Council, the Academy partially adopted some of its solutions, in spite of the fact that the Academy viewed the members of the Council as “*persona non grata*” (“*anāser-e*

²⁵ This messiness includes, among many others, the different ways of writing the prefix “*mī*” in certain verb tenses (attaching or not attaching it to the verb's stem) or different ways Persian speakers write the “*yā-ye ezāfe*” (the article that links two nouns or one noun and an adjective). An example of a more particular discrepancy with which the Council took issue is the two different ways the word “*andīš[e]mand*” is usually written (with or without a ‘*he*’ letter at the end of the first part of the word, *andīš[e]*).

nāmatlūb”)²⁶, if not counter-revolutionary (*zadd-e enqālab*).²⁷ The Council for Revision of Persian Orthography, with its official-sounding title, in fact started a non-political powerful grassroots movement at a time when the political environment of the country did not flatteringly welcome modern grassroots organizations.

The suggested changes by the Council that, in addition to *Ādīne*, were mostly materialized in Shamlou’s writing and widely circulated thanks to, among other things, his bestselling poetry volumes, triggered subsequent debates among educated Iranians. As a schoolchild who used to aimlessly page through *Ādīne* to which my parents subscribed, I remember conversations among my parents and their friends about the proposed orthographic changes. Similar debates were still going on in the Persian blogosphere during my fieldwork. These debates, among other things, included how a change in orthography is necessary for an unconfused psychological development of young learners. Unfit for the education of the modern citizens of tomorrow, the current orthography was deemed to be confusingly inconsistent and unnecessarily complicated, in need of a change.

Reaching beyond the issue of orthography, these debates addressed modernity and modern citizenship in various ways. Disparaging the current orthography seemed to be a proxy for criticizing other aspects of not-sufficiently-modern lifestyle in Iran. In these debates, the Persian orthography was tortuous; as was Iranian bureaucracy. Also, published texts typed in crisp and clean (*tamīz*) Roman fonts indicated a more significant

²⁶ For example, see this note by Faraj Sarkouhi, one of the members of the Council for Revision of Persian Orthography: <https://goo.gl/BYtQrO>

²⁷ *Ādīne*’s destiny and the fate of its editor-in-chief, Faraj Sarkouhi, were later tied to larger international political events, including the Mykonos restaurant assassinations of 1992.

quality of the Western, modern lifestyle. The Roman fonts were clean, as were European streets, and both were thought to be the result of modern planning in these “advanced countries where the society greatly invests in cultural development,” writes Faraj Sarkouhi, *Ādīne*’s ex-editor-in-chief. He continues that in these advanced countries “organizations that are trusted with scientific leadership design the writing systems prevalent in the society. The majority of authors, publishers, media outlets, and producers of educational books then follow the unified, homogenous, and standard orthography (*rasm-ol-xat-e yeksān va yek-dast-e me’yār*).”²⁸ As such, modernity, as the Other of tradition which was characterized as messy, confused, unplanned, undisciplined, arbitrary, inefficient, and closed to the larger (Western) world, has been at the center of these debates.²⁹ Those who have contemplated, adopted, or resisted the orthographic changes directly or indirectly have defined their own identities in relation to the form written words take.

By no means do I intend to portray the transition to this specific type of modern citizenship as a simple one—just the result of a technical transformation of writing technologies. I however would like to draw attentions to contribution of technology to this change and argue that people’s sense or experience of self is among other things

²⁸ <https://goo.gl/g5hfPM>

²⁹ This modern view can be observed in other areas of the work of members of the Council. For example, in the mid-1970s, Shamlou edited a collection of poems by the great 14th-century Iranian poet, Hafez. While different editions of the collection are usually separated by the number and quality of manuscripts the editors could locate, study, and compare, Shamlou’s edition is unique because, as he mentions in the introduction to the book, he tries to give the verses of the ‘ghazals’ (lyric poems) “the rational order and sequence” (“*tadāvom va tavālī-ye manteqī*”) (Hafez, 1975 [1354]) they lacked. The genre of ghazal is usually characterized with its verses not necessarily manifesting a narrative order. This however contradicted Shamlou’s modernist view. The disarray (*āšoftegī*) and messiness of the verses had to be *cleaned* and the ghazals needed to be organized. Shamlou’s major criticism to the previous traditionalist (or in his words, conservative [“*mohāfezekār*”]) editors of Hafez’s collection of poems, such as Allameh Mohammad Ghazvini (1874-1948) is that their work is not *rational*.

technological. In contrast to what is usually thought, beyond a simple indication of modernity, computers and software applications contributed to modernizing users in Iran. It is a topic a variation of which I will discuss in chapters 3 and 4 vis-à-vis blogging as a technology of writing. It is worth noting in passing, though, that blogging in Iran could not catch on if it were not for an advancement in computer character encoding—known as UTF-8 or Unicode. Blogging in Persian became easily available only after Blogger.com, a service that was later bought by Google, started to support Unicode. In chapter 2, I will briefly review the techno-cultural (pre-)history of blogging in Iran.

Writing both in terms of content (e.g., Updike’s writing after adopting a word processor) and form (e.g., the Council’s suggestions for change in Persian orthography) is therefore not the only thing that changes when people use new instruments of inscription. One’s thoughts are also affected by the technological medium one uses to write. In 1882, roughly one century prior to when Updike dismissed his secretary because he started to use a word processor, and Shamlou joined the Council to standardize the Persian orthography in part due to using the Zarnegār software, Nietzsche adopted a Malling-Hansen writing ball, an early version of later typewriters, so he could continue writing after losing his sight. After using the machine, Nietzsche famously wrote in a letter to a friend that “our writing instruments contribute to our thoughts” (cited in Ihde, 2002, p. 97). The recipient of the letter had already written to Nietzsche that his own “thoughts in music and language often depend on the quality of pen and paper” (N. G. Carr, 2010, p. 19). It is probably why criticizing Apple Mac’s portrayal as just “a clever new typewriter,” Italian author, Primo Levi who bought a Mac at the age of 65, wrote “it’s a lot more than that! It’s a memory prosthesis, an archive, an unprotesting secretary, a new

game each day, as well as a designer.” Using the machine for long hours and encouraging others to buy their own, Levi soon started to compare the machine to a drug (Thomson, 2003, pp. 455-456).

1-8- AN AUDIAL PARALLEL

Pen and paper, the Malling-Hansen writing ball, typewriters, the Wang, Apple Mac, Zarnegār, and blogging interfaces, are not just apparatuses we use to express our ideas. They all contribute differently to our thoughts and feelings because they offer new ways of organizing, storing, and restoring words due to their different formal properties. This is a topic into which I look more closely in chapter 4 where I refuse to investigate the medium of blogging as a formless, immaterial, and inconsequential technology.

To illustrate this point, let me for one last time step outside the domain of my study and point out an example again related to the 2016 Democratic National Convention (DNC) that as I already mentioned took place when I was writing my dissertation. Those of us who followed the Convention at home through YouTube or television networks, noticed that Senator Elizabeth Warren’s speech at the convention was disrupted by protestors (section 1-2) chanting “we trusted you!” After this episode, the effect of this and similar chants on the unity of the party and speculations about whether the crowd would boo the party’s nominee, Hillary Clinton, herself when she accepted the nomination were discussed by viewers on social networks and by commentators on TV. But as the sound-scholar and ethnographer of digital media, Mack

Hagood, writes in a piece in *Medium*,³⁰ the crowd that chanted “we trusted you!” most likely comprised only two individual hecklers. However, for viewers at home, they seemed to be able to undermine Warren’s performance. Seeing a discrepancy between what he heard first hand at the convention and what television networks reported, Hendrik Hertzberg, a staff writer at the *New Yorker*, retweeted a journalist’s tweet about the event and commented “From up in bleachers in the hall the Bernie booing wasn’t that bad. Maybe TV likes drama, therefore overdramatizes?”³¹ Hagood writes that this discrepancy is most likely due to the live TV audio technologies used in electronic field production that provide for viewers “an ‘ear of God’ perspective that no one at the actual event could possibly experience.” Comparing the booing episode to a clip from a televised fight on the floor of the 1968 DNC convention in Chicago, Hagood states that “while two agitated voices have a huge presence in 2016, hundreds or thousands of upset voices were largely inaudible in 1968.”

Just like sound technologies that contribute to our view of reality, writing technologies contribute to the formation of our thoughts, including our ideas about ourselves. In chapter 4, I will show this through ethnographic evidence in the context of the Persian blogosphere.

³⁰ <https://goo.gl/8Rm5gT>

³¹ <https://goo.gl/zMdMS9>

از خلاف‌آمد عادت بطلب کام که من،
کسب جمعیت از آن زلف پریشان کردم.

- حافظ

Pursue whatever you wish for by breaking old routines;
I became *one* by enjoying the *disheveled* hair of my beloved.

- Hafez

2

Chapter 2: Framework

2-1- INTRODUCTION

WHY IS BLOGGING AN EXTREMELY popular online activity in Iran? Why do Iranians engage in blogging to this extraordinary degree? What do they achieve with blogging that makes it an enormously popular online activity? In this dissertation, I argue that bloggers craft selves while they give an account of their daily lives in their personal blogs. Blogging, in general, is a unique activity, different from other kinds of writing or other types of narrative both in form and also in what effect it has on writers. But in the

context of the Persian blogosphere, particularly, the answer to the above-mentioned questions also requires a distinct cultural explanation rooted in the cultural context of contemporary Iran, coupled with the literary and narrative traditions that go back a thousand years or more. Underlining this background throughout the dissertation, I draw on ethnographic evidence in the chapters that follow to show that:

- **Chapter 3:** In the Persian blogosphere, bloggers may fashion selves by writing narratives about themselves. Blogs as places neither private nor public urge bloggers to write about their private experiences for a public audience. This place-related feature of blogging in Iran provides a unique way of forming self-centering narratives, because the activity takes place against a specific cultural, historical, and political backdrop. In return, blogging and the seemingly genuine narratives and autonomous selves it helps create have unique political consequences for the structure of power in the context of contemporary Iran.
- **Chapter 4:** In addition to the narratives bloggers compose in their blogs through which they bring about change to themselves, the technological medium of blogging itself, contributes to the creation of selves in unique ways. It is because in the existing media ecology, due to its formal properties, the technology of blogging can open certain paths for Iranian bloggers to create selves. It is to say that the seemingly autonomous selves are not independent of the formal properties of the technological medium that enables those selves.

- **Chapter 5:** And finally, not only the formal properties of the technology, but also the materiality of the blogger's typed words as they appear on the screen contributes, in culturally specific ways, to the self that may be crafted through the activity of blogging. It is to say that the seemingly genuine narratives blogging helps create may not be thought of as sincere, from the point of view of the dominant ideology of language. In conjunction with the findings of the previous chapters, the results of this chapter amount to a media philosophy that diverges from either representational or instrumental understanding of the medium to consider mediation as an outcome of immediacy.

I hope my ethnographic exploration deepens our understanding of blogging not as an ideal type or binary (redemptive or damning) but rather as a complex cultural place and communicational medium whose unique characteristics do not let us reduce it to its instrumental (as a neutral carrier of the user's will) or representational (as a means to disclose already-made selves) functions. My research is first and foremost about the Persian blogosphere. However, the theoretical implications of this research situate it within the larger fundamental discussion of how we are to understand technological media and what an anthropological study of media entails.

Before laying out my overall argument and presenting my ethnographic evidence in chapters 3 through 5, in the next section of this chapter (section 2-2) I give an account of the Persian blogosphere's history and the prehistory of social media in Iran. Instead of retelling the standard history of blogging in general (for that, look at: Stefanac, 2007) or

reciting its detailed history in Iran (for that purpose, look at: Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010), in my account, I stress the elements that speak to the approach outlined above. For that reason, I start the tale of creation of the Persian blogosphere with an account of Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs)—the media with which many Iranian users were introduced to the world of online social media.

I then review the existing literature in anthropology and closely related disciplines that informs my approach to the topic of my research. This literature includes the studies about (1) the cultural question of the ‘place’ of the Persian blogosphere (in terms of public and private) (section 2-3), (2) the relationship between the self and writing (section 2-4), and finally (3) the struggle of power in the cyberspace and the political consequences of engaging in activities taking place in a system that is intentionally designed to be horizontal rather than hierarchically structured (section 2-5). Finally, I will address the question of methodology in section 2-6.

2-2- THE PERSIAN BLOGOSPHERE AND ITS PREHISTORY

The Persian blogosphere’s tale of creation cannot be properly recounted if it is not prefaced with the prehistory of online social media in Iran. Blooming circa 1995, this prehistory cannot be moreover accounted for without including the then-new medium of Bulletin Board System. At a time when the World Wide Web (WWW) as we know it today was hardly available in Iran, BBSs, as precursors of contemporary online social media, were popular among those who owned personal computers. Having moved beyond its initial place in offices, universities, and schools, personal computers had

already penetrated the houses of economically or culturally middle-class Iranians for whom the machine functioned as a type of objectified cultural capital indicating social distinction. The young users of computers, the children of economically or culturally middle-class families, who later became the participants in BBSs were already well familiar with the ins and outs of the technology. In an era of post-war intensive privatization led by a technocrat administration (1989-1997), sometimes dubbed as the era of construction (*dorān-e sāzandegī*), recently-licensed private schools³² had become equipped with computer labs so they could separate themselves from competition. Also, some state-run, publicly-funded schools that only admitted well-achieved students had already started extracurricular or mandatory courses in which students were taught coding and computer programming mostly through high-level programming languages, Pascal and Microsoft BASIC.

In addition to computers already present inside the houses of economic or cultural middle-class and the skills already acquired by the younger generation, all one needed to partake in activities of a BBS were a modem (whose type, whether inexpensive internal or costly external, practically separated cultural from economic middle-class) and a landline phone. Using dial-up modems, members logged in computer servers running the BBS software allowing users to participate in a broad range of activities many of which were justly social—even in some aspects *more* social than those taking place in current social media that, for financial and technical reasons, detest hyperlinks, the basis for

³² These schools are ironically called non-for-profit schools (*madāres-e qeyr-e entefā'ī*) in harmony with an age-old naming politics of concealing the reality (or making a new one) by 'calling the bald (*kačal*), hair-covered (*zolfalī*)'.

WWW and critical to online social activities. One of the most popular BBS activities, correspondingly reproduced later in the blogosphere, was the exchange of opinions and ideas about matters of public interest in online public message boards, or forums—*anjoman*.³³ The software supporting the MS-DOS-based BBSs was easily Persianized and Iran System, an 8-bit character encoding scheme already developed for the language, allowed users to conveniently type in Persian alphabet when communicating in BBSs. Since writing was virtually the only medium the slow connections of the time could handle, textual content dominated the online activities facilitated by this new medium. In this way, BBSs were similar to classic textually-focused blogs and unlike the later social media in which visual and audial content became as important as, if not more important than, text, turning the web effectively into another medium—i.e., television (Derakhshan, 2015).

As an adolescent in the mid-1990s, I remember that I convinced my family (interestingly enough through the textual medium of a letter) to buy a low-cost internal modem which I installed in a free expansion slot of our i386-powered IBM compatible computer. I then became a member of a pioneer Iranian BBS, *Māvarā* (literally, ‘the beyond’), in whose several forums I learned how to debate ideas, write for a public audience, negotiate power struggles, and participate in democratic election of forum administrators among users who campaigned online for the positions. Although of a

³³ The word *anjoman* itself has a Habermasian (1989) public sphere tone to it, reminding one of the many local communities of the late 19th and early 20th century that shaped the tradition of social contribution in Iran’s modern history, triggering the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911 (Afary, 1996). *Anjoman-e moxaddarāt-e vatan* (The Homeland’s Women Community), *anjoman-e ĩyalatī-ye tabrīz* (Tabriz Provincial Community), and *anjoman-e baq-e meykade* (Meykade Garden Community) were a few of the most well-known communities among many social and political communities that flourished throughout the country at the time.

different nature, blogging, to which I was introduced a few years later, was in many ways similar to and in fact a pleasant reminder of the textually-focused activities in *Māvarā*. My nostalgic-sounding account of the prehistory of social media in Iran, followed by a period of decay of online Persian content, does not mean to paint a utopian picture as BBSs, in spite of providing a relatively democratic space, were not liberated from the actual-world economic and political power differences. Outside the online sphere of the BBS, the necessary hardware and the skills to use the infrastructure were not universally accessible to people from all strata of society. Personal computers were relatively expensive and the required skills were not taught in all schools and universities. Within the online realm, system administrators and those personally closer to companies and organizations on whose servers BBS programs were hosted, who usually were older than the average users of the BBS, enjoyed more power. Also, since BBS forums, compared to blogs, more closely fit the definition of the public sphere where one is culturally expected to control one's expressions, participants more strictly observed the legal and cultural requirements of public expression of opinions—especially because some BBSs were hosted on servers in the IT departments of governmental organizations.

The Persian blogosphere's tale of creation cannot be furthermore properly recounted if it does not take into account the *dark age* that intersected the passage from Bulletin Board Systems to blogs. Although WWW put BBSs out of business, the blooming of blogs did not instantaneously follow the demise of BBSs. BBSs were local, individual systems and as such the information never left the system. Therefore, users were only able to interact with other members of the BBS (almost exclusively local people because one had to dial the local phone number of the BBS to connect to the

system) as well as the content locally stored in the BBS server. Due to these limitations, inexpensive dial-up Internet services and early web browsers (particularly, Mosaic) that expanded the access from local servers to global networks (WWW) put an end to BBSs that started to disappear one after another. However, the WWW that followed BBSs and broadened access also instigated an unintentional dark age in the Persian web, a period of stagnation during which the web predominantly lacked Persian content. This period in the history of WWW in Iran coincided with the early years of the reformist administration (*dolat-e eslāhāt*) of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) when people felt emboldened to express themselves more freely in public. Producing very little in Persian while typing in Finglish or Fargelisi (the Persian written using the Latin alphabet), average users might spend several hours every day inside Yahoo chatrooms, one of the earliest places where many enjoyed an uncontrolled expression of thoughts in an online public space. However, due to technical issues, it was virtually impossible to produce anything in Persian. The dark age of the Persian web ended when a solution was devised to support the Persian language on web.



Figure 2.1 The first blogpost of the Persian blogosphere defines the concept of blogging.

The Persian blogosphere's tale of creation can finally be recounted with its official birth on September 7, 2001 when Salman Jariri published his first blogpost³⁴ in which he introduced the concept of blogging to his Persian-speaking readers and introduced *veb-nevešt*, a made-up Persian equivalent for the word blog: "Blog is a website or homepage that contains one's personal writings about interesting things one sees or thinks about. Blogs are usually updated every day" (figure 1.1). September 7 is still celebrated annually as the Persian Blogosphere Day (*rūz-e veblāgestān-e fārsī*). Although Jariri wrote the first Persian blogpost, the Persian blogosphere's tale of creation is usually recounted by not focusing on his blog, but by examining how Hossein Derakhshan (known by his blogging alias, Hoder) popularized the medium. Derakhshan (b. 1975), a former *Māvarā* BBS member and an Iranian blogger who started his own blog "Editor: Myself" (*sardabīr: xodam*) slightly after Jariri, is half-jokingly half-seriously known as the 'father of Persian blogging' (*pedar-e vebelāg-e fārsī* or sometimes, *abol-belāg*). Derakhshan however did not see a point in popularizing the medium before Blogger, an easy-to-use blogging web application, started to support Unicode (UTF-8, specifically), a standard for the consistent encoding for most of world's writing systems, including dextrosinistral (RTL) systems, like Persian. Unicode, or more accurately its adoption by Blogger, was therefore the technical force ending the dark age of the Persian web.

Prior to Unicode, although WWW had become relatively widely available in Iran, developing Persian websites of any type was incredibly difficult. As a pioneer web-

³⁴ <https://goo.gl/zBz0OQ>

developer at the time, Hossein Derakhshan in a podcast interview³⁵ in August 2016 describes the difficulties of developing a webpage in Persian prior to Unicode. According to him, web developers were not able simply to insert the content in the HTML code of the pages they had designed. They first had to type the content of the webpage in *Zarnegār* (an MS-DOS-based word processing software mentioned in the previous chapter). After exporting the *Zarnegār*-formatted text to an Iran System-encoded document, it could be now transformed to Windows and then be inserted in the HTML code. But since the RTL text direction was not recognized, the text did not automatically break at the end of each line. Therefore, developers had to manually adjust every single line. Every single design element on the page, as a result, had to be decided in advance, because the smallest change in the content required new HTML coding so the line breaks in wrong places would not wreck the whole design. This had made developing Persian webpages, especially those that intended to be updated periodically (like blogs), virtually unworkable.

Derakhshan started his own blog after he was introduced to Unicode. However, Microsoft Notepad, the native Windows plain text editing program, was the only software supporting Unicode at the time. Consequently, Derakhshan had to manually update his blog every time he wanted to add new content by transferring his written texts from Notepad to the HTML code of his website. At the same time, observing Blogger's ability automatically to take care of all this labor and effectively manage the content written in the Latin alphabet, he contacted the company, co-founded by Evan Williams who

³⁵ <https://goo.gl/2OYiYJ>

afterward co-created the micro-blogging and social networking service, Twitter, and publishing platform, Medium. Derakhshan urged the company to support Unicode in its application so bloggers could use the content management service to create blogs in Persian without having to update their pages manually. As soon as Blogger started its support of Unicode, Derakhshan published an enormously influential technical instruction guide in Persian to teach others how to create Persian language blogs. He also contributed to the flourishing of the Persian blogosphere by preparing several templates for Persian Blogger-based blogs³⁶ and including in his own blog the links to newly-born blogs in the community. All of these efforts to foster the blogging community in Iran earned him the title of the Father of Persian blogging. Curious about the new medium and thirsty for producing and consuming Persian content greatly missed in the dark age of the Persian web, many Iranians used Derakhshan's instructions to create their blogs by using the free service provided by Blogger. Blogs, more than any other online media therefore helped end the dark age of the Persian web. As such, the Persian web was initially defined by its blogosphere and it is even until now known for its robust community of bloggers.

Without reading too much into it, one can perceive a quaint parallel between the larger socio-political context and the development of online social media in Iran. While the expansion of technological infrastructure corresponded to a technocrat administration, the exercise of free expression of thought in social media took place during a reformist

³⁶ Because it was used in the early templates designed by Derakhshan, Tahoma, a font whose undistinguishable diacritic underdots made Persian words hard to read, became a standard font for web publishing in Persian. It was later replaced by Times New Roman.

administration.³⁷ In any rate, a technical advancement fostered by a usually overlooked infrastructure was necessary for the expansion of the Persian blogosphere, which in turn contributed to political and cultural change. Derakhshan, accurately states in the above-mentioned podcast interview that blogging democratized writing in Iran as it decentralized content production. The Persian blogosphere was just an illustration of the desire to equalize power instigated by the idea of WWW at the time. According to Derakhshan, that utopian hope was technologically materialized in Blogger's software option that permitted bloggers to use the application merely as a content management system. It allowed users to manage their blogs with the application for free without forcing them to host the content on the service's domains as it used to let users transfer the content (through File Transfer Protocol (FTP)) to their own websites. The demise of the utopian hope of WWW that was supposed to eliminate power differences is also technologically symbolized in the fact that Blogger, now owned by Google, removed the FTP option as it wants to control the content and keep the profit-making traffic on the subdomains of Blogspot.com hosting Blogger.com-produced blogs. If the FTP option symbolized decentralization of content in a hope for equalization of power, the removal of the option indicated centralization of content in the name of profit and control. It is therefore necessary to pay attention to the technical, material infrastructure, ranging from accessibility of Internet-enabled computers to availability of the FTP option in a blogging software. Because although attention is mostly paid to the content of blogs, the

³⁷ Mohammad-Ali Abthai who served as the Vice President for 3 years during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami was the first cabinet member in Iran who had his own personal blog updated regularly by himself. Abthai had many blogger friends in the community and used his position in the cabinet to advocate for a less restrictive Internet access.

infrastructure in fact offers and constrains the possibilities of the content produced in and communicated through the medium.

While democratization of content production had political consequences, blogging in Iran also generated new cultural questions as it introduced a novel place for writing about one's experiences and interests. Many bloggers started to use this new space to define identities and fashion selves. Although similar in some aspects to BBS forums of the prehistory of online social media and comparable in other ways to Yahoo chatrooms of the dark ages of the Persian web, personal blogs were unique as they were places neither public nor private. Unlike forums or chatrooms they were run by an individual blogger (and in rare cases by a small group of bloggers) who did not always observe the strict traditional requirements for expression of thoughts in public because the blog was considered to be private in spite of it being visible by others. The question of place in terms of public and private still became more complicated because in the context of Iranian culture, it, among other things, is gendered. The contradictory situation of displaying what traditionally belongs to the private in public in post-Revolution Iran is perhaps most perceivable when watching the interior scenes of the Iranian movies made inside Iran. Although Iranian women do not need to wear the Islamic *hejab* inside the private space of their houses, the indoor scenes still unrealistically depict them with *hejab*, even when they are sleeping in bed, because the scenes depicting their private lives are meant to be watched by the public.

The Persian blogosphere's tale of creation is therefore a story of written language, technological media, culture, gender, and politics. An anthropological study of the Persian blogosphere must therefore take into account all these factors. In the sections that

follow I discuss how the existing literature in anthropology and closely related disciplines structure my discussion of the phenomenon in this dissertation.

2-3- CULTURAL PERCEPTION OF SPACE IN IRAN

Cultural perceptions of space in terms of ‘public’ vs. ‘private’ which correspond to perceptions of the ‘*zāher*’ (the external, outside) vs. the ‘*bāten*’ (the internal, inside) inform Iranians’ behavior in their daily actions and interactions. These categories have significant gender-linked implications, as well as repercussions for valuing reason and passion that collectively color social life in Iran and many other Middle Eastern cultures. Anthropological and historical studies have, however, suggested that people did not traditionally conceive of the relationship between the public and the private as fixed, uniform, and unambiguous. In fact, it was modernity that attempted to demarcate the two spaces neatly and make the boundaries between them less opaque and unclear. Nevertheless, the modern attempt at clearly separating public from private and the *zāher* from the *bāten* has ironically provided evidence that the two are closely intertwined and related as changes in public expressions of the self (*zāher*) were meant to alter the inner self (*bāten*) and create modern subjects. Examining studies of cultural perceptions of space in Iran, in particular, and in the Middle East, in general, I address the question of the *space* of the Persian blogosphere by showing that the broader study of the categories of public and private provides a framework to understand the blogosphere where private lives are shared in a public space. I argue that the ambiguous relation between the two spaces, the contested status of their relationship, different incarnations of the two in

practice through time, and the flexibility of their definitions make blogging culturally recognizable despite its newness.

Beeman (1986, pp. 10-11) states that the opposition between the internal and the external is one of the two arenas of symbolic cultural contrast (along with hierarchy vs. equality) that play a major role in social life in Iran. The internal, which is referred to as the *bāten*, is the seat of strongest personal feelings. The internal translates into the traditional architectural form of the *andarūn*, the most private and secluded space within the household where one does not have to control one's appearance or words strictly. Also, since *nāmahram* or 'unlawful' men (those in whose presence veiling is required for women) (S. Haeri, 1989, p. 76) are not allowed in the *andarūn*, it is thought of as women's indisputable territory (Honarbin-Holliday, 2008, p. 19; Moallem, 2005, p. 189). On the other hand, the external, the realm of controlled expression, is labeled the *zāher* and is materialized in the traditional architectural form of the *bīrūn* of the household where family members entertain *nāmahram* guests. Although contemporary architecture of smaller apartments in larger cities does not usually accommodate separate spaces for the *andarūn* and the *bīrūn*, many Iranian families still observe the demarcation of the two spaces and their related gender-linked norms, albeit to a lesser degree (S. Haeri, 1980, p. 215). Also, as more women start to work outside homes, the *bīrūn* has been extendedly used to denote public spaces (e.g., streets, restaurants, buses, and etc.) in contrast to the entire house as the private *andarūn*.

In addition to their gendered associations (Bayat, 2010, p. 107), the categories of the internal and the external respectively marks relaxed behavior and self-control. In southern Iraq where a similar cultural norm exists, tribal guesthouse (*mozif*) participants

are expected to be dressed formally and control their behavior to the extent at which they must avoid unnecessary laughter. Moreover, participants in the public activities of guest houses may be harshly criticized and ridiculed if they speak in a confused or irrational way (Salim, 1962, p. 77; as cited in D. F. Eickelman, 2001, p. 220). So, whereas the *andarān* is associated with ‘passion’, free expression, and relaxed (*bī-ta’ārof*³⁸) behavior (Beeman, 1982, p. 31; 2001, p. 47), the *bīrūn* mandates self-control and ‘reason’ (Milani, 1992). In other words, to maintain the *zāher*, reason must control passion (sometimes linked not only to feelings but also to baser instincts) which is believed to be placed in the *bāten*. If the *bāten* remains unchecked, it may lead people to shameful conduct.

The relation between the *zāher* and the *bāten* does not, however, imply an uncomplicated superiority of reason over passion as the two—reason and consequently the *zāher* as well as passion and thus the *bāten*—are interpreted both positively and negatively. When construed positively, the *bāten* as the seat of passion is endeared for its authenticity and closeness to the truth. Beeman (1986, p. 11) writes that the feelings and emotions contained in the *bāten* are generally positively valued. Reason, on the other hand, may sometimes be valued negatively in moral terms as it may suggest dishonest calculation, manipulation, and hypocrisy (Varzi, 2006, pp. 157-158). According to Sufism, in particular, God as the ultimate truth is “veiled behind earthly appearances [*zāher*]” and its unveiling cannot be accomplished by book learning or through the use of reason (Lindholm, 2002, p. 182). There is therefore a ‘family resemblance’ between the internal, the *bāten*, passion, and the private domain of the *andarān* as a female space on

³⁸ *Ta’ārof* is, in lack of a better translation, a form of social and linguistic ‘etiquette.’ *Bī-ta’ārof* therefore means without following the rules of polite communication.

the one hand and the external, the *zāher*, reason, and the public arena of the *bīrūn* as a male space on the other. Because these elements generally correspond in Iranian, as well as other Middle Eastern cultures, studying each of them illuminates other elements and their interconnection.

Although conventional gender discourses and naturalistic assumptions about gender informed by formal Islamic tradition have been contested and criticized (Mir-Hosseini, 1996a, 1996b, 1999; Najmabadi, 1998), similar to gender-linked meaning of public and private, reason and passion (*‘aql* and *nafs*) are still understood in gendered terms. Rosen (1978, p. 568; 1984, pp. 31-34) in his study of Sefrou, Morocco, Torab (1996, pp. 236-237; 2007, p. 13) in her study of female religious gatherings in Tehran, Iran, and Lavie (1990, p. 119) in her study of the Mzeina Bedouins observe that there are assumptions according to which although both men and women possess both passion and reason, women cannot develop reason as fully as men do. That women and men are not equally associated with reason and order and that women must thus be controlled by reasonable men partially explains the ideology behind the protection of women through the seclusion of the *andarūn*. However, the contradictory and ambiguous status of passion in relation to reason as discussed above also imbues Muslim attitudes toward women. As such, women are regarded as both “*fetne*” (literally: chaos and also sedition that must be controlled (Mernissi, 1987, pp. 4-10; Nashat, 1983, p. 185)) and dear, beloved, and precious which again must be kept from the prying eyes of *nāmahrāms*.³⁹

Women (and consequently passion) are therefore seen as simultaneously danger and

³⁹ This explains the seemingly contradictory Islamic *hadith* and Quaranic verses that both sanction the repression of women by their husbands as well as recommendation for endearing them.

healing (S. Haeri, 1989, p. 70; Hammoudi, 1993, p. 155), and as the sources of both honor (or *nāmūs*) (Amin, 2002, p. 18) and shame (cf. Asano-Tamanoi, 1987, p. 104; Delaney, 1991)⁴⁰.

The privacy of the house that provides protection for men's *nāmūs* and their passions is conceived of as *harem*, sanctuary. In the past, the sacredness of the house as a place secured from the prying eyes of the public (Kadivar, 2003, p. 662) was taken so seriously to the extent at which *muezzins*, men appointed to mosques to recite the call to prayer, were not allowed to climb minarets if it would make it possible for them to see into houses (O'Meara, 2007, p. 37). In fact, the Islamic *fiqh al-bunyan* (the building law) a collection of opinions on Islamic cities' architectural environment, has walls (as what that separates public and private) as its sole theme (O'Meara, 2007, p. 29). The distinction between public and private which is pervasive in many Middle Eastern cultures is not, however, only aimed at protecting the private (i.e., female members of the family and passions) from the public. The public (i.e., men and reason), must be equally protected from the private—i.e., passions and women which are both seemingly paradoxically conceived to be very powerful.

As she discusses the Bedouin code of honor, Lila Abu-Lughod (1999, pp. 89-90) writes that people are expected not to complain about their pain and rage in hospitals, even if they have undergone surgeries, so as to demonstrate their mastery over passions. She also observes that Bedouin men do not cry in public “regardless of the intensity of

⁴⁰ It should not come then as a big surprise that the role of women in society reduced to the symbol of their seclusion has been pivotal to the construction of modern nations in the Middle East (Najmabadi, 1993a, 1993c; Paidar, 1995).

their grief,” so they can prove they are ‘tougher’ (*jabbār*) than their emotions. To express passions publicly, one is then left only with ritualized ways including poetry (L. Abu-Lughod, 1999), telling stories and performing allegories (Lavie, 1990), music, and religious ceremony which especially in the case of Iran includes group expressions of mourning in public during the month of Moharram (Afary, 2003, p. 13; Beeman, 1986, p. 70; Fischer & Abedi, 1990, p. 55). Similar to passions that due to their power must be controlled, women who are believed to be more powerful than men in terms of emotions, passion, and especially sexual desire, should also be guarded against to the extent that in parts of Iran men are strongly advised not to look at their wives’ naked bodies even during sexual intercourse lest men become impotent (Vieille, 1978, p. 462). The cultural belief in women’s power also led Abolhassan Banisadr, the first President of the post-Revolution Iran, to say famously that the sight of women’s hair excites men out of their normal state (Tabari & Yeganeh, 1982, p. 110). Therefore, to protect the public male space of the *bīrun* from the dangerous power of women, women must cover themselves when they leave the private female space of the *andarūn*.

As demonstrated in several studies, the public/private distinction based on the internal and external categories is a significant aspect of life in Iran, as well as various Middle Eastern cultures. Nevertheless, the relation between the two sides of the public/private cultural contrast is not fixed or rigid. Quite the opposite, the relationship between them is contested and blurred. Beeman (1986, p. 11) maintains that the *andarūn* and the *bīrun* are to some extent portable and a matter of subjective judgment and definition. For instance, he observes that when an Iranian family picnics in a public park, by bringing a carpet and some other home accessories with them, although they are

actually in public, the family members act more like they are in the private space of their home. The portability of private space in other Middle Eastern societies has been pointed out in other ethnographies as well. For example, writing about women in Pakistan, Papanek (1982) describes the burqa as “portable seclusion” and asserts that it allows Muslim women to go outside the protected space of their houses without breaking the codes of honor. Similarly, problematizing the conventional idea that Muslim women’s veiling limits them, Webster (1984) argues that it is an extension of the house without which women would be restricted to the private houses. Moreover, Lila Abu-Lughod (2002a, p. 785) depicts Muslim women’s covers as “mobile homes” that signify belonging to a moral way of life in which the home is associated with the sanctity of women. As such, the veil signifies that women, although moving into the public space, remain in the sacred space of their private homes.

In addition, and related, to mobility of the private, there are also ambiguous spaces not clearly marked as either public or private. These are places that because of their ambivalent status can be used by women for resisting strict cultural codes. Writing about the importance of space, Friedl in her ethnography of a very small town in Iran holds that on the verandah of a house one is both outside yet entirely at home; “able to talk and listen and learn, yet safely sheltered inside one’s walls; able to look and see yet by dint of a linguistic convention properly secluded, even without a veil” (1989, p. 28). Friedl tells the story of a widow who although was culturally supposed to control the external appearance of her expressions in the public, by using this undefined space was able to shame her family and make them comply with her demands. Moallem (2005, p. 85) ascribes a comparable liminality (between public and private) to the roof (*pošt-e*

bām) of houses in Tehran under the 1978 curfew that similarly turned them into sites of protest and revolt.

Moreover, the borders of the private *andarūn* may be well extended to include the whole neighborhood—normally considered to be part of the public *bīrūn*. Janet Abu-Lughod (1987, p. 168) points out a third space in addition to public and private in the Arab cities which she calls “semi-private space.” The semi-private space pertains to zones outside houses that use a common accessway in neighborhoods where women can move more freely. Researching the legal records of the *shari’a* court, Rizk Khoury (1997, pp. 114-117) similarly illustrates that to middle- and lower-class women the quarter and neighborhood and the complex web of social relations within the neighborhood are of utmost importance—probably even more important than family relations and private houses. Christine Eickelman (1984, p. 81) and Hildred Geertz (1979) discuss the significance of similar spaces respectively in northern Oman (where this space is called *hayyān*) and Morocco (where it is called *darb*).

This hints at the class discrepancies in the observation of the public-private demands. In fact, the honorific title which was used for upper-class women in Iran, *moxaddare*, means both ‘secluded’ and ‘one who does not need to work.’ For tribeswomen in Iran who regularly engage in work and leisure activities with males (Huang, 2009, p. 24), female domains exist but do not necessarily indicate seclusion (p. 164). Bayat (1997, p. 27) also observes that in homes in the slums of Tehran just before the 1979 revolution “the line between private and public could hardly be drawn.” This fits the studies of Geertz (1979), Tucker (1993), and Ruggles (2000) which demonstrate that historically family wealth and social status were significant factors in determining

the extent of seclusion. For instance, writing about 18th and 19th century Egypt, Tucker (1993, p. 200) asserts that the private and secluded harem was an upper-class institution and although wealthy women used to own properties and invest in businesses, unlike women of more humble background, they did not go to courts for financial transactions and handled their business through agents. On the other hand, the lower-class lifestyle “could not sustain female seclusion” because families could not afford the loss of female labor (Tucker, 1993, p. 203). Women of lower-class families were therefore part of a public work life. This is to say that although the categories of public and private exists, the boundaries between the two have never been straightforward.

The broader historical and anthropological studies therefore demonstrate that although significant, the public vs. private distinction does not imply an inflexible, unambiguous relation. Not only does the boundary between public and private fluctuate as its meaning is constantly interpreted, but also these cultural formations have had different meanings to people of various socio-economic statuses and throughout time. In fact, some scholars hold that traditionally the boundary between public and private spaces was unclear and as such the *Orient* looked chaotic to eyes of Europeans, especially women travelers (Moallem, 2005, p. 49), who with local ‘civilized’ men supported the movement toward stripping Eastern women of their veils, removing them from the *andarūn*, and making them less opaque in order to civilize them (Grewal, 1996, p. 49; as cited in Moallem, 2005, p. 48). Arguing that the invention of the bourgeois home in Iran ended the “architecture of ambiguity and transgression,” Moallem (2005, p. 52) observes that in many 19th century travelogues of Europeans, missionaries found no words for *home* in local languages. They in fact found themselves reluctant to call houses that

consisted of one large room occupied by several generations *home*, “the sacred name so dear to the heart of English people” (Hume-Griffith, 1909, p. 231; quoted in Moallem, 2005, p. 50) (cf. Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997, Chapter 6, for similar processes of civilization in Africa (the Tswana); Elias, 1978, pp. 162-168 in Europe).

Also, as she reviews the modernization of women in Iran, Najmabadi (1993b) argues that unveiling the bodies of women as a result of a modern attempt to make them less opaque was accomplished at the expense of veiling their discourse. She maintains that modernity transformed the pre-modern woman’s absence from the public and her oral voice into “her unveiled public presence and her printed words” (p. 487). However, as a result of this transformation, the female voice, which used to be uttered in a homosocial female space (Bayat, 2010, p. 53) and was consequently openly *bī-ta’ārof* to the extent of being highly sexual in language (even shamelessly pornographic when compared to present-day norms), was “sanitized” and turned into a disciplined voice. An example of such a *bī-ta’ārof* language can be found in *Bibi Khanum Astarabadi*’s 19th century book *Vices of Men (Ma’āyeb al-Rejāl)* written at a transformative moment in response to a misogynous text *Disciplining Women (Ta’dīb al-Nesvān)*. Najmabadi illustrates this “language of feminine transgressive irony” (Najmabadi, 1993b, p. 493) interweaving “classical, religious, and popular texts” and “moving from a prophetic tale to a street joke” was later rejected as backward and in an effort to make boundaries clear its sources “bifurcated into secular/religious, polite/vulgar, modern/traditional” (p. 495). The physical veil was also now replaced by “an invisible metaphoric veil, *hijab-i ‘iffat* (veil of chastity)” that must be acquired through modern education in order to fashion a modern self—“a disciplined modern body that obscured the woman’s sexuality,

obliterated its bodily presence” (p. 489). Similar to invention of the bourgeois home that aimed to make the public/private boundaries less opaque, the simultaneous processes of unveiling the woman’s body and veiling her discourse were aimed at straightening the boundaries between differently valued categories of reason (more controlled, public, formal, written, male discourse) and passion (more relaxed, private, informal, oral, female discourse).⁴¹

Modernity therefore attempted to delineate boundaries neatly between the public and the private and reason and passion to render them unambiguously separate. Nevertheless, this neither means that modernity has been successful, nor that the public rational expression of the self is a facade put on for social approval while the private expression of one’s passions reflects one’s “real” feelings. In contrast to this solely dramaturgical approach, studies such as those of Najmabadi (1993b) and Moallem (2005) demonstrate that public and private are intertwined and linked as change in public expression of the self (*zāher*), in my ethnography’s case, in writing (or separating public from private) means to alter traditional subjects and fashion new selves (*bāten*). In other words, the “real” and “genuine” *bāten* is not independent of the *zāher*; the *zāher* is already in the *bāten* as the former is not merely a social imposition on the latter, but forms it.

Regulating public and private spaces and holding them unconnected as much as possible, the post-Revolutionary Iranian government in its endeavor, which despite

⁴¹ Elsewhere, Najmabadi (2005) discusses a similar modern project through which various gender identities for which the 19th-century Iranian culture had ways of naming were reduced to the cotemporary binary of male/female and as a result previously accepted fractures of masculinity were conceived of as impure. This modern project had its similar ways of making differences unambiguous.

pretending otherwise shares similar ambitions with modernity, employs ways through which “the public sphere, or surface (*zāher*) is meant to affect the interior space of faith and belief (*baten*)” (Varzi, 2006, p. 132). Varzi (2006) argues that through public display of images (especially image of Ayatollah Khomeini) (cf. Chelkowski & Dabashi, 2000) as well as Islamic rituals, the Islamic Republic tries to produce Islamic subjects: “The idea is that practice [*zāher*] will eventually produce believers [*bāten*]” (Varzi, 2006, p. 145). In the field of media anthropology, this corresponds to the practice of listening to cassette sermons in Egypt (Hirschkind, 2006) whose goal is to clean the *bāten* by exposing it to the mere words. Recorded sermons contribute to the creation of pious Muslim Egyptians not simply through dissemination of ideas or instilling religious ideologies, but through their “effect on the human sensorium, on the affects, sensibilities, and perceptual habits of its vast audience” (p. 2). Mahmood (2003, p. 838) also notes that the “piety movement” in Egypt criticizes the nationalist-identitarian view that conceives of the veil as an expression of Arab-Muslim identity on the ground that it overlooks the repercussions of Islamic ritual practices (*zāher*) on “the realization of a pious life” and hence reduces the rituals to “the status of cultural customs” (cf. N. Haeri, 2013 for an argument about the repercussions of private performance of the daily prayers on reflexivity and self-creation; Mahmood, 2005 for an argument about contribution of public religious gatherings to creation of pious Muslim women in Egypt).

Although the Islamic government of Iran intends to separate and heavily regulate both public and private spaces (Bayat, 2010, p. 142), its policies have contradictorily helped the opposite. Entering of *nāmāhram* morals police by force into private homes to break up parties (Mahdavi, 2009, p. 23), as well as ideological intervention in the private

spaces of families such as asking school children to inform authorities about their parents' private values and activities inside homes (Kian-Thiebaut, 2005, pp. 62-63) confuse the two categories. The invasion of private spaces in Iran (Kar, 2003) then meets with a backlash from people who recognize the contradiction in rules and values (Varzi, 2006, p. 142) and put it on view by their actions which Mahdavi (2009) calls a 'passionate uprising' (cf. Afary, 2009; Moaveni, 2005). To illustrate her argument about Iran's passionate uprising, Mahdavi's ethnography (2009, p. 6) tells the story of a girl who, to protest a morals police officer who had asked her to cover what that could be seen of her hair, removed her clothes in public. Mahdavi (2009, p. 185) notes that "the duality of public/private in Iran has changed, and young people are using the social and sexual revolution to make their public and private worlds more alike."

Despite its significance, the relationship between the public and the private is therefore anything but fixed. Because of the significance of the relation between the two, the emergence of the Persian blogosphere where private lives are shared publicly has kindled the debate over the question of the blogosphere in terms of public vs. private space (Alexanian, 2006). The broader study of the categories of public and private, some of whose aspects have been discussed here, provides a framework to understand the blogosphere.

The blogs whose bloggers share their most intimate and private aspect of their lives may be thought of as spaces where people "walk down a street with no clothes on" (Cross, 2007, pp. 28-29). Bloggers who share their most private stories, passions, and emotions in public by using a *naked* or *unveiled* language may conceive of their blogs as an explicit resistance against the Islamic Republic's intrusion into the private lives of its

citizens and its regulation of public spaces (Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010, pp. 120-122). Therefore, when scolded for their *bī-ta'ārof* blogposts not covered by 'the veil of chastity,' many, especially women, respond by saying if what they write bothers the reader, the reader does not have to read them. This resonates with the popular response of Iranian women to the morals police's admonition in streets asking women to guard their headscarves. Many who see this as an intrusion of their privacy protest and talk back by saying "you guard your eyes" (Mahdavi, 2009, p. 129).

On the other hand, similar to Banisadr who supported women's veiling on the grounds of protecting the public from what that belongs to the private, the Iranian government blocks this type of blogging in the name of public morality⁴² (Bucar & Fazaeli, 2008, p. 405). In addition to the government, a group of men who find their domain 'forayed' by the *fetne* women support the silencing of these voices (Shakhsari, 2010). Some women who believe emotion and passion belong in the private space of homes also have no problem with blocking this sort of blog whose genre also, like that of *vices of men*, does not respect boundaries between polite and vulgar.

Also, the studies that portray the private as mobile and a matter of subjective judgment help explain why some bloggers choose titles for their blogs that signal privacy. Like the Iranian family indicating its being in a private place by bringing a carpet to a public park, some bloggers choose titles that signify being in the sanctuary of a private place, despite knowing each and every one of their words can be read by *nāmahram* 'outsiders.' A popular blog title indicating privacy is "*Āhān Dīvārī-ye Extiyārī*" which

⁴² For example, on 7/9/2013, Tehran's prosecutor announced that publishing private photos even by the owners of the photos themselves on the public online platforms is a crime (Digarban, 2013).

loosely translates to a ‘four-walled’ and therefore private place (*Čehār Dīvārī*) over which one has control (*Extīyār*). Similarly, the culturally familiar in-between spaces, the cultural significance of ‘third space,’ and expansion of the physical borders of the *andarūn* guide one in understanding why Iranian bloggers more often than not title the blogroll (links to other blogs) section of their blogs “*hamsāyehā*” (neighbors) and call the Persian blogosphere “*Veblāgestān*” (Bucar & Fazaeli, 2008; Doostdar, 2004; Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010) that gives the impression of being in a semi-private, friendly community.

Anthropological and historical studies of perceptions of public vs. private space show that although the distinction between public and private informs daily actions and interactions among Iranians, the relationship between the two is not fixed and is incarnated differently throughout time. Today, Iranians use culturally familiar and available idioms to perceive, explain, question, negotiate, and contest the meaning of the blogosphere in terms of public vs. private. It does not mean however that the Persian blogosphere is not different from physical space. Unlike physical space, the blogosphere is a permanently in-between space and is unable to provide complete seclusion. Even so, the existence of virtual space accords with traditional notions of physical space in that cultural perceptions of space are non-uniform in both. Blogging therefore, unlike what some scholars (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008a, p. 239) have stated is not “in complete contradiction to the famous Iranian cultural duality of *zaher* [...] and *baten* [...], where people present an appearance that in fact functions as a veil to cover and protect their inner self” as the physical space itself does not follow strict public/private designations. As such, one must be cautious in claiming that simply because of confusing the

public/private distinctions the Persian blogosphere “is nothing less than a revolution within the Revolution” (Alavi, 2005, p. 7).

2-4- WRITING AND THE SELF

Drawing on and quickly reviewing existing anthropological research and studies in other related fields, in this section I show it can be argued that in a bidirectional manner one is *being written* at the same time one writes by the very technological medium one uses to write—e.g., blogging. To this end, I start off by discussing anthropology’s stance on the topic of writing. Through some illustrations from research in anthropology and other close disciplines I show that writing and its various technological instruments, despite what modern language ideology portrays, contribute to the creation of the self. Finally, I discuss how blogging enables the formation of the self in ways that are different from other forms of writing.

Although from its inception anthropology has been employing writing as its primary means of knowledge production, writing itself did not emerge as a major subject of anthropological research as Basso (1974) had called for it—at least not before the publication of Clifford and Marcus’s *Writing Culture* in 1986. Barton and Papen (2011, p. 4) point out that traditional anthropology’s lack of interest in the study of writing as a process is partly due to the discipline’s occupation with researching the cultural “other” characterized with its orality. Even when it took writing into account, anthropologists tended to regard written records simply as data. Anthropologists, in other words, tended to look at the locally-produced texts (frequently originally oral and reproduced in writing

by the ethnographer) as “a community’s ethnography of itself” (Barber, 2007, p. 2) to make a way into the inner life of societies. Malinowski’s zeal to build a “*corpus inscriptionum Kiriwiniensium*” containing “an abundant linguistic material, and a series of ethnographic documents” (Malinowski, 1984, p. 18) reflects such a data- or archive-oriented approach according to which written records, mostly produced by the ethnographer, were reverse engineered to demonstrate the native’s point of view. However, since the original linguistic material was mostly oral, Malinowski, for example, advises that it should not be thought of as “a mere mirror of reflected thought.” He views (written) language of the ‘civilized’ world as a neutral instrument and states that unlike for literate societies for whom language is “an instrument of reflection,” for “primitive, non-civilized peoples” “language functions as a link in concerted human activity, as a piece of human behaviour” (Malinowski, 1989, p. 312).

Barton and Papen (2011, p. 4) add that another reason for anthropology’s not generally being known for studying writing is that because writing studies is an interdisciplinary field of research, scholars who study it do not necessarily identify themselves as anthropologists. Nevertheless, within the field of anthropology, albeit using an interdisciplinary approach, Jack Goody (initially with Ian Watt (1963) and then individually (1977, 1986, 1987, 2000)) is probably the most renowned anthropologist who studied the social and cognitive effects of writing. Although he reexamined his views several times to address criticisms,⁴³ his original and still unchanged core idea that writing is not a neutral instrument and has a major effect on the self and cultural structure

⁴³ In his most recent book on the subject of writing where he responds to his critics, Goody (2000) categorizes them into two groups of postmodernists and cultural relativists.

has initiated a debate within the field of anthropology. Goody's view, sometimes dubbed the 'great divide' model, proposes that many justifiable dimensions of the differences pioneer anthropologists noted between so-called 'primitive' and 'civilized' thoughts, mentalities, and systems "can be related to changes in the mode of communication, especially the introduction of various forms of writing" (1977, p. 16). Despite its shortcomings, Goody's view of the consequences of writing on the self, along with similar positions of scholars in close disciplines such as those of Flusser (2011) and Ong (1982), paved the way into serious discussions of anthropological studies of writing. Furthermore, although these views have been critiqued for putting forward a sharp divide between literate and pre-literate societies, inaccurate categorizations of writing systems, failure to notice socio-cultural and ideological contexts, decontextualized portrayal of consequences of writing, and conclusions not always drawn based on ethnographic evidence (Street, 1984), the core idea that writing contributes to the creation of the self has been proved valid. In other words, although disagreeing on many points, contributors to the debate on anthropological studies of writing share an overarching rejection of the disregard for the constitutive capacities of writing, as well as the naturalization of a particular ideological view of writing.

Mobilizing these debates as a scrutiny of writing's role in anthropological knowledge production, Clifford and Marcus (1986) along with contributors to their edited volume expanded the debate to include the relationship between writing and anthropology itself and most notably opened our eyes to the significance of writing not as simply a means of reporting the anthropological field, but also as a "way of thinking" (Stewart, 2012, p. 518) without which the subject could not think as it does, "not only

when engaged in writing but normally when it is composing its thoughts in oral form” (Ong, 1982, p. 78). The contributors to *Writing Culture* therefore hold that in the practice of ethnography the ideology claiming transparency of representation and immediacy of experience must be reevaluated. Following Derrida’s (1976) depiction of the signified as indistinguishable from the trace (p. 73), they collectively demonstrate that writing is constitutive of meaning, and hence a way of thinking, rather than an inert medium for bringing back the presence of experience or language to thought. This is in stark opposition to Malinowski’s idea of writing as an inert instrument mentioned above—inert to the degree that it is implied that the ‘unmediated’ presence of the truth is possible.

Similarly, when the ‘meaning’ to be conveyed is the inner self—as it is in the blogs this dissertation studies—writing as the medium of its conveyance, therefore, contributes to its creation (cf. Duranti, 1993, p. 25). This notion of the subject’s interiority parallels some directions in studies of subjectivity that suggest the self does not match “an already made, fully constituted,” (Deleuze, 2001, p. 43) and ideally dematerialized subject—a subject that corresponds to the “liberal humanist view of the self” (Hayles, 1999, p. 286) whose interactional and dialogical process of creation is denied (Crapanzano, 1996, p. 112) (cf. Guattari & Genosko, 1996, p. 215). Instead, it can be argued that in a process of interaction (Silverstein, 1997) the self is fashioned through writing and other material processes. These processes, therefore, contribute to the construction of subjectivity and formation of the very self they claim to innocently represent.

From both process-oriented and object-oriented points of view and both within (Gell, 1998) and without (Bennett, 2010; Bryant, 2011) the field of anthropology, it has

been demonstrated that subjects are closely entangled with objects and material processes. It has been, therefore, argued that subjects should not be characterized as the polar opposite of objects. Thomas (1991; as cited in Kean (2005, p. 193)) for example shows that wearing *sulu* skirts that cover converted Polynesian women's breasts did not represent their new identity. On the contrary, it made the new belief and the very conversion achievable in a Pascalian process of *kneel down and you will believe* (cf. Hirschkind, 2006; Mahmood, 2005 for the consequences of religious media consumption on self-formation in Egypt). Likewise, if one conceives of writing as a material process, it can be argued that writing is not merely a means of expressing the writer's pre-existent subjectivity. Various writing forms, instruments, and modalities of writing such as blogging make certain selves and particular qualities in them possible in different contexts.

Anthropological studies that use a similar approach to writing and the self are in accord with this conception of the relationship between the two. For example, Goody (1998, p. 107) in his discussion on the discourse of romantic love references to Stone (1977, p. 11) who ascribes the growth of affect to the growth in "the capacity to express emotions on paper." Goody concludes that expressions on paper do not express already existing feelings. In contrast, it creates those sentiments through a process of reflexivity and thus shapes the identity of the romantic lover. In Goody's argument, it is important for the expressions to be in the form of written words because written words create "an object outside oneself in a way that speech cannot do, at least in the same clear-cut fashion" (1998, pp. 110-111) and hence provide a context for the formation of the

romantic lover.⁴⁴ Similarly, describing the practice of letter-writing among the people of Nukulaelae Atoll in the central Pacific for whom the primary goal of writing is to write letters, Besnier (1989) demonstrates that letter-writing not only provides a way to express emotions that could not otherwise be expressed, but also makes those emotions available in the first place.

Cody (2009, 2013) makes similar points in his research on adult literacy activism in a formerly ‘untouchable’ village in rural Tamil India where a group of people are petitioning the government after having learned to sign their names. In line with Derrida who argues “The signature invents the signer,” (1986; as quoted in Cody (2009, p. 367)) Cody maintains that the signers at the moment of signing their names at the administrative office are not simply full citizens “exercising their agency by representing themselves to an absent addressee” (p. 376); they are becoming modern citizens through pedagogical disciplines, by having attended literacy classes, and by signing petitions. Cody concludes that the very act of representation through signatures produces the citizens that will be later represented by those signatures. In a different context, as she discusses the Japanese ethics schools where she was re-educated into the values of the *ie* system, Kondo (1990, p. 94) very briefly alludes to the role of diary writing in the process of self-transformation. Kondo describes how students are asked to write about their weaknesses, achievements, and goals on a nightly basis. Teachers then read and commented on diaries for students to use in their self-transformation mission (cf. Ryang,

⁴⁴ It seems that in oral traditions, established genres have the same effect. Discussing a young Ilongot headhunter’s song, Rosaldo (1980, p. 286) shows how a certain speech genre that allows the song and singer to be dissociated from the self addressed in the song gives rise to emotions.

2008, p. 82, for its depiction of the practice of 'chonghwamun' (writing self-review reports) in North Korea).

In the examples mentioned above, the medium, whether it is letter, signed petition, or diary, plays a role in the creation or transformation of the self. While signed (instead of thumbprinted) petitions in rural Tamil India are linked to an act of political agency and help Indian women become citizens, letters in the Central Pacific sanction affects due to their association with parting. However, as Hayles (2002, p. 19) writes, a sharp line has been traditionally drawn in the humanities between representation and the technologies producing them. The humanities, in other words, tend to “downplay the medium in favor of the message” (Livingston, 2006, p. 12). When it comes to studying writing as a medium and its technological instrument, the same approach usually promotes research of the contents of media independent of the media themselves (Duguid, 1996, p. 78). This approach therefore tends to overlook the technological medium’s role, which is clear, for example, in Nietzsche’s use of typewriter. Reflecting on his experience with a Hanson Writing Ball, a then-advanced typewriter, in 1882, Nietzsche famously wrote “our writing instruments contribute to our thoughts”⁴⁵ (Ihde, 2002, p. 97). The new Nietzsche of “telegram style” (Kittler, 1999, p. 203) was formed by the typewriter he took up with the hope of continuing to write after losing sight. Describing the ‘discourse network’⁴⁶ of 1800 which highlights seamless transition from nature to culture, Kittler also discovers the significance of handwriting in the formation

⁴⁵ This also reminds Wittgenstein’s famous quote cited frequently by post-human and cyborg scholars: “If again we talk about the locality where thinking takes place we have a right to say that this locality is the paper on which we write” (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 7).

⁴⁶ According to Kittler a discourse network is “the network of technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and process relevant data” (1990, p. 369).

of the subject. He asserts that “whoever wrote in block letters would not be an individual [...] To develop handwriting as out of one mold means to produce individuals” (Kittler, 1990, pp. 83-84). As such, one can argue that machines and technologies, including those of writing, have “agency in the construction of subjectivities” (Downey, Dumit, & Williams, 1995, p. 344) (cf. Haraway, 1985).

This approach in studying media resonates with recent directions in ethnographic laboratory studies informed by the work of Latour and Woolgar (1986) who, in their ethnographic study of a scientific laboratory at the *Salk Institute for Biological Studies*, observe that there are few activities in laboratory, a place whose primary goal is “persuasion through literary inscription” (p. 88), which are not connected to writing. In this fashion, “laboratory [... takes on] the appearance of a system of literary inscription” (p. 52). In addition to researchers constantly occupied with writing, laboratory equipment or as Latour and Woolgar put it, inscription devices, also work to transform a material substance to a figure or diagram (p. 51). Latour and Woolgar maintain that the process of inscription and material tools used in the lab contribute to the production of what is referred to as reality. They hold that a fact is a statement that is “freed from the circumstances of its production [i.e., the medium of its inscription]” (p. 105) (cf. Pontille, 2011).

Despite the ethnographic and historical illustrations of how writing and writing technologies contribute to the formation of the self and construction of subjectivity, this contribution has not been explicitly acknowledged by the dominant modern Euro-American “linguistic ideology” (Hill & Gal, 2000; Kroskrity, 2000; Schieffelin, Woolard, & Kroskrity, 1998; Silverstein, 1979) and its perception of the presumed link between

language and the inner self, which is generally characterized with the ascription of agentival capacity merely to those who preserve their autonomy and interiority in the face of the materiality of semiotic forms, including written words (Asad, 1993; S. Carr, 2006; Favret-Saada, 1980; Keane, 1997a, 2005, 2007). The abjuration of language's participation in what it represents can be understood as a byproduct of the Foucauldian modern episteme (Foucault, 1973, p. 251) which downplays interrelation and co-construction in favor of depth. As such, this ideology assumes a conception of writing in which it functions as a medium that does not affect the message it communicates (in this case, one's inner self). Therefore, the materiality of semiotic forms, that semiotic forms are enfolded, among other things, in the technological (Bratteteig, 2009) or material medium of their respective apparatuses (e.g., Typewriter (Kittler, 1999) or Microsoft Word (Fuller, 2003)) and the role this materiality plays in the formation of the subject are much neglected realities in the modern semiotic regimes.

However, although it is generally repressed in the Western mode of writing (Derrida, 1976, p. 128), the contribution of writing to the construction of the self is not in fact strange to the modern semiotic ideology. Drawing upon U.S. self-help literature that showcases what modern ideology of language both represses and reveals about the link between writing and subjectivity, Wilf (2011, p. 465) in his ethnographic study of artistic training illustrates that, at least in the case of creative self-expression, even the dominant linguistic ideology acknowledges the subjects' interaction "with the material infrastructure of semiotic forms in order [for subjects] to 'find themselves' within [...]"

disorienting contemporary moment.”⁴⁷ Wilf therefore shows that in the cases of indecision individuals figure out who they want to be only after they objectify their possible options in written scenarios and narratives and consult their own words.

This form of self-understanding resonates with Sartre’s ideas since he holds that one is able to grasp a momentary meaning of life only if one reflects on it and composes a narrative, ideally a written one. This idea becomes plain in Sartre’s novel *Nausea* (1949). Despite all the difficulties the novel’s protagonist Roquentin has with words, for instance, when he says “the word remains on my lips: it refuses to go and rest upon the thing” (1949, p. 69), it is finally through composing a narrative, writing the history of his own, and defining the process of his transformation that he obtains a momentary meaning of life. *Nausea* therefore demonstrates the textual, and in the Roquentin’s case written, procedure of self-understanding and self-creation.⁴⁸ This concept of a self-understanding

⁴⁷ Modern Persian, or the dominant language ideology in Iran, seems to be an example of a non Euro-American linguistic ideology that shares the same repressive element. However, one could observe that although in modern Persian, language’s primary function is understood to be simply conveying meaning without affecting it (Natel-Khanlari, 1964), language, especially in Persian mystical literature, is sometimes meant to be constitutive of the self. One exemplary symbolic portrayal of this conception of language’s function is depicted in *manteq-al teyr* (Attar, 1984), literally *Language of the Birds* which in English is translated as *Conference of the Birds*, a 12th-century Persian epic, that describes the journey of a group of birds who eventually become their own sought-after king, *Simorgh*, literally Thirty Birds, or Phoenix, as it is usually translated in English. In *Manteq-al teyr* the birds, first inchoate, eventually become the one whom they were seeking as the story of each bird is unfolded. The name *Simorgh* then seems to have a performative power that enables a collective self (i.e., *Simorgh*) to represent their new identity as much as it constitutes their identity. Deleuze also emphasizes the collective ramifications of ‘fabulation.’ However, when the situation entails individuals, the performative power of the written text fits the Deleuzian notion of writing as something absolutely inseparable from becoming (Deleuze, 1997, p. 1) that contributes to a new self-conception (Deleuze, 1986, p. 150). Moreover, the ‘fabulatory function’ of words is best epitomized in letters that produce their recipients as one, for instance, observes in Thomas Hardy’s (1964) novel *Far from the Madding Crowd*, in which *Boldwood* “becomes the bold lover Barthsheba’s valentine seems to tell him he is.” (J. H. Miller, 1984, p. 137) Here, a self is fashioned as the recipient receives the letter. In other words, the written words of the letter in their materiality precede the self: at its arrival, the letter constitutes its recipient as a subject (Royle, 1991, p. 15).

⁴⁸ Similarly, with Ricoeur, the autonomy of written text and the fact that it is emancipated from its ostensive references “gives to the subject a new capacity for knowing himself” (1976, p. 94).

narrative is also in line with Crapanzano's (1996) idea that self-centering narratives are more than a chronology and story; they are additionally a means of knowing and constructing the self.

In self-centering narratives, one becomes the object of one's own knowledge by which the subject emerges. The subject, if Foucault (1977) is to be followed, is then created through self-reflection and self-monitoring. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that the subject turns into an individual by turning on itself and becoming "the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault, 1977, p. 203). The self-subjection and the necessity of a reflective understanding of the self in the form of a narrative supports the idea that the self is produced over time through narrative, histories, and stories (cf. Butler, 1999; Hegel, 1977). In *Technologies of the Self*, Foucault (1988b) stresses the significance of reflexivity in the culture of taking care of oneself. He (1988b, p. 27) asserts that an important practice in this culture is writing, to the extent at which "taking care of oneself became linked to constant writing activity." Applying this idea, Gutman (1988) interprets Rousseau's *Confessions* as a technology of the self and a method of subjection in which the self is constituted by writing, and concludes that an individuated self "is connected to, and dependent on, the activity of writing" (Gutman, 1988, p. 102). Lejeune (2009, p. 54) similarly illustrates that in the history of Christianity, supervised writing is understood to be a way through which "one can achieve mastery of the self."

Research on writing in anthropology and related disciplines therefore shows that the subject's interiority does not simply precede the words that articulate it. Rather, although the dominant modern ideology requires a medium that conveys the message (i.e., the inner self) without affecting it, writing and its technological instruments

contribute to the creation of the self. However, writing's contribution to the construction of the self does not take place in a uniform and deterministic manner. Different writing technologies enable different subjectivities in different contexts, due to their dissimilar formal properties. In the final part of this section, I address the question of what ways of expression and formation of the self blogging enables in Iran. This final section works to address this question by considering blogging in the context of the dominant contemporary Iranian culture. Although selves are constantly being fashioned in the Persian blogosphere, because the history of the Partisan blogosphere has mostly become the history of political struggle, the self-creation function of blogging is often ignored (cf. Gitelman, 2006, p. 94).

Returning to the Nietzsche's quote mentioned above, one could argue that technology helps the thought processes be externalized and therefore influences human cognition. This externalized, distributed cognition, "a material-informational entity," (Hayles, 1999, p. 3) corresponds to a "smart environment" where technologies and communities outside us process, sort, and store information for us (A. Reid, 2007, pp. 10-11). Blogging adds a certain aspect to this smart environment and helps bloggers to 'find' themselves as they compose self-centering narratives in writing. This process which following Ricoeur (1992, pp. 147-148) can be called "narrative identification" helps shape subjectivities as their stories are narrated and unfolded. Blogging technology intensifies this process of the simultaneous unfolding of stories and creation of the self as it makes it easier for one's stories to be tied not only effortlessly to one's past stories but

also to stories of other bloggers.⁴⁹ The realization of this connectedness of stories is visible in generous use of hyperlinks (quickly disappearing from newer forms of social media) in blogposts which refer to, among other things, one's own old ideas and stories and those of other bloggers. In blogposts, the 'quotation indications' are regularly non-verbal and include the weight or boldness of the fonts, underlined or colored words, and also other features activated only by the mouse rollover. In this relatively confused setting where everything might be a retelling or a reformulation and where the level of quotations is not clearly distinguishable, past stories of the self and others are 'close,' hence the use of the short-distance deictic, *īnjā* (here, as in "I relate to what she has said here in her post" (and "here" is a hyperlink to someone else's story)) when bloggers verbally denote a reference. Blogging enables a mode of writing in which "the far-away [is] brought to the here-and-now" (M. T. Taussig, 1993, p. 40). As such, blogging enables expression and formation of the "self" in a way that is different from other forms of writing. Therefore, as I will later show, recurrent referencing to one's older blogposts and other bloggers' posts, as well as frequent testimonials of 'finding oneself' not only in one's own blogposts but also in those of other bloggers is related to this aspect of smart environment enabled by the technology of blogging.

As an analogy, blogging, at least in the context of Iranian culture, seems to have similar effects as those of inexpensively available cars ('mobile bedrooms') in the 1960s sexual revolution. Although under constant observation, similar to cars, blogs are generally thought of as personal spaces. For the younger generation, this has provided a

⁴⁹ This approach can be better understood if it is contrasted to that of Alexander (2011) who views blog as a means for narrating fully formed selves— as "character vehicles" (p. 48).

personal social space away from the eyes of authoritative, technologically undereducated parents. Also, in addition to make it possible for the younger generation to be “publicly private,” blogging allows bloggers to be “privately public” (Barton & Lee, 2013, p. 68) and write anonymously to compose self-centering narratives and fashion selves as they discover new realms of thought and “new possibilities for social interaction and community” (A. Reid, 2007, p. 13).

Furthermore, bringing into question the already-disturbed public/private distinction (Lovink, 2008, p. 7), blogging makes available an in-between form of writing. As mentioned in the previous section, in the context of the Iranian culture, parallel in-between spaces are traditionally associated with protesting (e.g., verandah and roof; see the previous section) or sharing feelings in a homosocial setting (e.g., the ‘third’ space of the neighborhood for women; see the previous section). As such, blogging provides an unprecedented writing equivalent for these traditional oral forms of expression and self-formation giving rise to feelings that are usually expressed in the social practice of *dard-e-del* (freewheeling conversation about feelings *that make one’s heart ache*) and to objection, anger, and resistance.

Blogging as a form of writing also enables a fragmentary expression and formation of the self as it offers juxtapositions of unlike, unexpected, and unconnected items (e.g., writings of different genres, copied posts from other blogs, etc.). In addition, although blogging may seem to be a way of giving continuity and coherence to one’s experiences, unlike conventional autobiography, it provides an incoherent form of writing. In fact, although the chronological order of a blog arranges the blogger’s experience, it is the same chronological format that makes fragmentation possible.

If we agree that the mixing of heterogeneous objects and therefore incoherency is at the root of ‘com-positioning’ (literally, to position adjacently) (A. Reid, 2007, p. 139), blogging as a form of writing is com-positioning *par excellence*. Diminishing the differences between the reader and the writer, formal properties of blogging enable the expression and construction of the self in a way that is different from other forms of writing. It in fact makes natively available the technique of “rip, mix, and burn” (Lessig, 2004; as cited in Reid, 2007, p. 130) as a process of self-fashioning and expression.⁵⁰ As such, significance of writing practices related to blogging discussed above does not simply reside in the meaning they signify to bloggers, but in the work they do in fashioning them.

2-5- THE NEW MEDIA AND POWER

I will show in this section that despite the common view of new media used in and shaping virtual spaces as either supporting egalitarianism or abetting the creation or retention of power inequalities, the effect of new media on power can be more realistically depicted in a non-totalizing, non-deterministic, and non-reductive way with a seemingly paradoxical combination of empowering and disenfranchising aspects. I illustrate this through examples of the opportunities and restrictions new media cause and

⁵⁰ The different ways of self expression and formation blogging enables are not limited to those related to the content of blogs. They also include the tagging system that bloggers and readers use to categorize blog contents. Building on Shirky’s (2005) argument that tagging offers an alternative ontology than conventional cataloguing used in libraries, Reid (2007, pp. 138-139) writes that catalogues are *ad hoc* systems of organization whereas tagging is an organic *post hoc* method. In other words, catalogues are relatively fixed and their success is dependent on how well they approximate the future content. The tagging system, on the contrary, develops as people use them. This enables a different way of self-expression and formation, especially in micro-blogging websites such as Twitter and now-defunct Friendfeed, that they are frequently used to categorize and name feelings among other things.

conclude that similar to the *real/actual* world, in the virtual space, there is no place outside the realm of power. To describe the situation more accurately, the analysis of power in the virtual space should then avoid romanticization and take into account both technological and cultural contexts in which new media are used.

The Internet-powered new media serve as “a mode of imagining the future” (D. Miller & Slater, 2000, p. 13) (cf. Marcus, 1995, p. 4, for his formulation of technoscientific imaginary). Regardless of being utopian or dystopian, the imagined future is celebrated or feared for the changes it brings for power relations. Whereas the dystopian view, which is sometimes couched in the language of technophobia, is concerned with the Internet’s power to control people and societies (Dinello, 2005), the utopian position heralds a future characterized with egalitarian and non-repressive relations as, for instance, one can see in the words of Daniel Miller’s Trinidadian interlocutor who declares that Facebook has god-sent potential for equalization through technology (D. Miller, 2011, p. 91). Also, while in the dystopian scenario new media facilitate manipulation and control as people’s personal information is exposed to the public, in the imagined utopia social hierarchies are leveled (Turner, 2006) and people will be free from social restrictions. One example of these deterministic views at work is the portrayal of the Persian blogosphere. Since the history of the Persian blogosphere has disproportionately become the history of political struggle, the question of power in the Persian blogosphere has taken the form of ideological and political power. As such, the Persian blogosphere has been equally portrayed as a democratic sphere invulnerable to the state’s ideological censorship where everyone has a voice, and as a threat to the privacy of its participants as they become easy targets for the government’s prosecution.

The question of power in the Persian blogosphere has therefore been reduced to a struggle between a suppressing state and a homogenous group of freedom-seeking bloggers (cf. Alavi, 2005).

Although the two deterministic utopian and dystopian views seem to disagree on the question of power and equality, what in fact distinguishes the two is the way in which they conceive of the nature of new media—and not that of power. If Foucault's critique of "juridico-discursive" conceptualization of power is to be followed, the question of power in both utopian and dystopian views is alike "reduced to an effect of obedience" (Foucault, 1990, p. 85). Highlighting the dangers of being subject to constant surveillance in the virtual space (both willingly and unwillingly), the dystopian view foresees the emergence of an "absolute" power which in contrast with the "lawful" power cannot be willingly obeyed. On the contrary, the utopian stance justifies its vision from an architectural design point of view. That the platform of the World Wide Web is intentionally designed horizontally and that, as its creator Tim Berners-Lee puts it, "there is no top to the World Wide Web" (as quoted in: Barlow, 2008, p. 86) translates deterministically into a belief in an approaching cyber-utopia in which there will exist no entities more powerful than others to obey. If in the dystopian imagination power is maximized to an 'absolute' degree, in the utopian view of power it is omitted to the degree of 'zero.' Varying only in degree, the two views therefore share the same conception of power that only works through mechanisms of law and restriction. Infected by the "virus of new era thinking," (Thrift, 1996, p. 1463) a result of generalization "from a narrow range of experience," (Anderson, 2003, p. 48) and inferred from "overreliance on horizontal [...] form of analysis," (Elmer, 2006, p. 159) these technologically

deterministic views ascribe revolutionary features to new media in terms of empowerment or deprivation of power “without attending to the history of such claims.” (Hine, 2005, p. 6) (cf. F. Webster, 1995)

Despite Foucault’s excellent reformulation of the “juridico-discursive” concept of power to a force omnipresent in all relations (Foucault, 1980, p. 141), his notion seems to be indifferent to the particularity of media. Foucault famously ends the chapter on Panopticism in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977) by asking “Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons” (p. 228)? If we think of these institutions as the media of power as Foucault does, the Foucauldian power seems to be uninterested in the particularity of its technological medium. Moreover, although he explains that different types of power (i.e., disciplinary, hermeneutic/confessional, and care of the self) make different subjectivities possible, he does not account for how different technologies within each category enable different subjectivities. This may explain Kittler’s project of *technologizing* Foucault as he writes that “even writing itself, before it ends up in libraries [where Foucault found evidence for his archeological project], is a communication medium, the technology of which the archeologist [i.e., Foucault] simply forgot” (Kittler, 1999, p. 5).

In examining the question of power in new media in terms of empowering or disfranchising, in addition to considering other forms of power (other than the law-based, top-bottom power) and their technological medium as mentioned above, it is also critical to account for the virtual space in which new media are introduced and used. The virtual space, which is now mostly thought of as a production of modern computing, existed before the introduction of networked computers. Fandoms of the 1930s are an example of

an imagined community in which fans, an activist audience practicing their collective power, worked together in such an ‘offline’ virtual space (Jenkins, 2002, p. 158; Ross, 1991, pp. 106-114). Networked computers expand these virtual spaces, broaden the degree of participation, and thus accelerate “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 1992) through which people interacting with others can develop their identities and turn into media creators. As such, new electronic media have enabled countless robust virtual communities (Rheingold, 2000, p. 381). Wellman (2001) suggests that traditional communities have been complemented by “networked individualism.” People, along with their membership in densely-knit and local community groups, have become members of loosely-bounded, sparsely-knit networks. These virtual networks sometimes known as “knowledge spaces” (Lévy, 2001) break geographic constraints on communication more easily than ever. Virtual knowledge communities formed around the use of new media are voluntary (unlike *organic* social groups, e.g., families), temporary, and tactical affiliations, “defined through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments” (Jenkins, 2002, p. 158).

Although the virtual space of knowledge communities has dramatically changed power relations as it enables broader participation of a greater group of people, some scholars have noted that the virtual space in which new media are introduced and used is not totally independent of physical geographies. The social, cultural, and economic realities of the physical geography in which new media are introduced are influential in shaping new media’s empowering and disfranchising qualities. For instance, Miller’s ethnographic research of Trinidadians’ use of Facebook (2011) shows a pronounced heterogeneity of media-related experiences of power within and across social groups. As

such, the use of new electronic media in the virtual space shares with rituals a liminal quality (Danet, 2005, p. 235). Following Carey's (2009) classic description of communication as ritual, one can argue for liminality of new media practices in the virtual space as they are "out of ordinary without being fully other than" (Hillis, 2009, p. 76). Therefore, since the virtual and the actual mutually constitute one another (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 18), to address the question of power in the virtual space, it should be put in its cultural and technological context as the entanglement of people and new media has made it impossible to understand media and culture and virtual spaces and the real world independently of each other. Due to the dominance of a focus on "community formation and identity play" in studies of the virtual space, the tendency "to see Internet spaces as self-contained cultures" has been intensified (Hine, 2005, p. 27). It however, as I discuss in the next section, does not mean that online communities and virtual worlds do not provide enough 'context' for an ethnographic research. Considering specific social, cultural, and historical contexts is then especially important in researching the use of new media in the virtual space because, in contrast to how it is portrayed, even the infrastructure on which new electronic media operate does not offer "a cross-culturally universal solution" (Ito, 2005, p. 5).

As such, like any other culture, new media as should be considered as a unique culture embedded within broader cultural milieus (Hess, 1995, p. 11) and power relations (Kendall, 2002, p. 138). Individuals in this new culture are "in the midst of a system of power relations that remains out of phase with their conscious mind" (Poster, 2006, p. 38). The reductive perspectives, whether utopian or dystopian, fail to take into consideration the complications that shape this system of power. Several studies have

shown that power relations in the virtual space are more complicated and paradoxical than usually portrayed. As an example of the exercise of the top-bottom power in the virtual space, Reid (1999) demonstrates that in adventure-style text MUDs (Multi User Dungeon), which are shared virtual spaces, the social power one retains is practically proportional to one's technical mastery. In the hierarchy of power in this early example of virtual worlds, the person at the top with access to and the ability to modify every computer file is known as "the God of the MUD" (p. 109). Since the God of the MUD can literally change the virtual world, he holds the most social power. The power the God and other privileged users (e.g., the Wizards) hold in a MUD is well represented in the social boundary or the "divine distance" (p. 119) they preserve between themselves and ordinary users. The high-status users on adventure-style MUDs, instead of spending time traveling through their virtual world, stay at some certain inaccessible rooms. Not only do ordinary users need permission to gain admission to these rooms, but they must also be very cautious in requesting such permissions, for if what they want to discuss with the room owners is found to be insignificant, they would be punished for wasting the wizards' time. It is part of the MUD's mores into which new users are initiated by more experienced users (Poster, 2006, p. 146). In contrast to the idea of an egalitarian utopia, the mores of the MUDs resonate with those of monarch states. The inaccessible rooms on social MUDs resemble the closed circle of the courts in traditional monarchical states (Thompson, 1995, p. 124). Both the inaccessible rooms and the courts play the same role in the maintenance and manifestation of high-status people's power.

Similar to adventure MUDs, in social MUDs there are well-developed hierarchies of users. However, the contribution one makes within the MUD is more significant than

the hierarchies in indicating one's social power (E. Reid, 1999, p. 126). Preferential treatment in assigning high status positions aside, Reid (1999, p. 130) illustrates that although the mechanism of gaining social power in social MUDs is different from that in adventure MUDs, it still exists in terms of popularity and social acceptance. Therefore, individuals in MUDs still experience hierarchical power to the extent at which Reid (1999, p. 112) states that "there is indeed no moment on a MUD in which users are not enmeshed within a web of social rules and expectations." Similarly, Herring (1994) illustrates that participants' gender affects their own and other people's behavior in online discussion groups (cf. Herring, 1999). Studying some discussion lists over a one-year period, she (Herring, 1993) also shows that despite the claim that virtual communities are opportunities for democratizing communication (Danet, 1998), male participants dominate discussions both in amount of talk and through rhetorical intimidation (cf. Cherny & Weise, 1996; Herring, 1996; Herring, Johnson, & DiBenedetto, 1995; Wheeler, 2004).

Furthermore, far from a cyber-utopia of power equality, Reid (1999, pp. 114-118) depicts a 'cyber violence' that took place on one social MUD populated with users who had experienced sexual assault in the *real* world and were in fact using the MUD as a virtual help center (cf. Dibbell, 1998; Li, 2005 for an example of virtual rape). In this incidence, by using some specific commands, a user of the MUD changed *her* gender to male and began *his* virtual attack. Being victims of *his* assault, some of the users ironically logged out of the MUD and fled back to the *real* world to avoid the *virtual* assault.

This incident may be better understood if it is compared with one of the cases Freud points out in *The Interpretation of Dreams* in which he (1913, p. 403) gives the example of a father whose son has just died. While grieving, the father falls asleep next to the son's coffin. He dreams that the son is standing by his bed in fire and cries 'Father, can't you see I'm burning?' The father wakes soon and sees the room is on fire. What awakens the father is the smoke coming out of the shroud burning by a fallen candle. Arguing that "reality is for those who cannot sustain the dream," Zizek (2006) deciphers the father's dream and asks "Had the father woken up because the external stimulus became too strong to be contained within the dream-scenario? Or was it the obverse, that the father constructed the dream in order to prolong his sleep, but what he encountered in the dream was much more unbearable even than external reality, so that he woke up to escape into that reality."

Similarly, in the cyber assault incidence, the virtual community in which the real world victims had taken shelter becomes more agonizing than the *actual* world in a matter of minutes. The users looking for help online, paradoxically, logged out of the virtual world and fled to the same reality from which they had originally escaped. This shows that a gap exists between the implied users and causal narratives embedded by the designers of a technology and what actually takes place when people use it (Gershon, 2010b, p. 285; Hine, 2005, p. 8). In other words, the structure of a technology does not determine the relations of power among users. Nevertheless, the "affordances of a communication technology" (Hutchby, 2001) help "shape the participant structure brought into being through its use, simultaneously enabling and limiting how

communication can take place through that medium, how the communication circulates” (Gershon, 2010b, p. 285) (cf. Akrich, 1991; Gershon, 2010a, p. 23).

The non-deterministic view of the empowering and disenfranchising qualities of new media as they are used in virtual spaces guides one to understand the question of power without romanticizing resistance and totalizing the different sides of a struggle over power, and leads one to understand how the use of new media in the virtual space simultaneously empowers users and retains or creates power inequalities. One application of this view, albeit not in a virtual space, is Gamson’s (1998) study of acceptance of gays and lesbians in daytime tabloid talk shows. Avoiding celebrating talk shows as democratizing opportunities or dismissing them as ‘trash,’ he shows that the gays and lesbians’ acceptance on the television shows are “conditional” (p. 109). He therefore does not totalize identities and argues that the power relations are not limited to those between sexual conformists and sexual nonconformists. The relations of power among different groups of sexual nonconformists should also be taken into consideration. Gay and lesbians have been normalized on television shows at the expense of bisexual and transgender people who are portrayed respectively as those who have an excessive sexuality and those who do not recognize the truth of anatomy (pp. 165-166). Calling this a “paradox of visibility,” he, therefore, shows that although it is partially true that by their presence on television shows, gays and lesbians have achieved acceptance in the eyes of the sexual conformist majority, a new hierarchy of sexuality and hence new relations of power among the nonconformists themselves have emerged. Gamson’s approach toward the question of power on daily shows resonates with Abu-Lughod’s critique of the “reductionist theories of power” (1990, p. 53).

Criticizing the romanticization of resistance, Abu-Lughod, following Foucault, maintains that there is no place outside the realm of power. Therefore, when discussing the empowering qualities of new media, one should be aware that although new media can be emancipatory in certain ways, the social relations in the virtual space are not devoid of power relations resulting in inequalities.

For example, although the Persian blogosphere facilitates the dissemination of ideas of secular intellectuals who may not be allowed to publish their work freely through traditional media (e.g., newspaper, books, etc.), it simultaneously puts their authority and hegemony in jeopardy as they no longer have the sole rights to the production of meaning for the public. Traditional intellectuals therefore attempt to salvage their hegemony by turning the views of their ex-audience and new rivals in meaning production (i.e., *lay* bloggers) into public problems and delegitimize their opinions. They attack both the content of lay people's blogs as vulgar (Doostdar, 2004) and also their use of language as flawed. On the contrary, to many lay bloggers, blogs, like their predecessors, zines, not only "do not demand perfection," but also "create connections between readers and writers" through the lack of perfection, the messiness, incompleteness, and abundance of misspelling (Piepmeier, 2009, pp. 115-116).

The fading of intellectuals' authority has been accelerated as new media boost the 'collective intelligence' of virtual communities. As Jenkins (2008) describes a virtual "knowledge community" (Lévy, 1997) whose goal is spoil the reality TV show *Survivor*, he explains a similar change in the hegemony of experts by contrasting the new idea of 'collective knowledge' with the deep-seated 'expert paradigm.' Since new media have enabled contributions from larger groups of people to the production of knowledge and

meaning, “traditional assumptions about expertise are breaking down” (Jenkins, 2008, p. 52). Consequently, the boundaries between “exterior” (i.e., those who do not have the skill and hence remain audience) and “interior” (i.e., experts) imposed by the expert paradigm have become unstable (p. 53) (cf. Constable, 2003, p. 37).⁵¹ In the case of the Persian blogosphere, the instability of traditional intellectuals’ hegemony leads them to identify lay bloggers’ view as a public problem and hence ignite a “moral panic” (Cohen, 1973) about the moral implication of lay bloggers’ views. To intellectuals, lay bloggers’ views usually involve a “poverty of values” (Meyers, 2004, p. 198) (i.e., a range of moral flaws such as disrespect toward social structure, tradition, and national identity stemming from an immoral intention) that should be omitted. As such, in the Persian blogosphere intellectuals’ freedom of speech accompanies the silencing of lay bloggers in a space generally praised for its democratic values and its empowering of “people” (which are usually portrayed as a homogenous anti-government group of bloggers).⁵²

That the virtual space is not devoid of power does not mean that the use of new electronic media in the virtual space has not given power to some. It particularly helps

⁵¹ Also, as Becker (1982) describes the collective activities that result in a work of art, he distinguishes between “core” and “support” activities. While core activities require special artistic gifts, support activities involve technical jobs that facilitate the core activities. Being an artist usually correlates with doing the core activity (Becker, 1982, p. 18) which consequently corresponds to having a gift that justifies the artists’ authority. Becker observes that changing the definition of the core activity results in difficulties in the division of labor (p. 9). Similar changes take place in the virtual space where new media enable everyone to do core activities (i.e., produce meaning) and also transfer some of the support activity to those who used to do only the core activities. These transformations have made traditional experts more accessible and as a result, they have lost their absolute authority.

⁵² Also, the “lay bloggers” are more diversified in their political views than usually portrayed. Not only are some groups not generally represented in academic and non-academic writings about the Persian blogosphere, but also their voice inside the Persian blogosphere is silenced. As such, democratization is realized at the expense of silencing others in the form of dictatorship of the majority—e.g., boycotting voices that are not of the same mind to the majority of a certain virtual community, voting down the links they post on Digg.com-like websites, etc.

move some from silence to speech (Cheung, 2007, p. 277). The empowering quality of new media to some extent emanates from the fact that they have armed a vast number of people with their own media (Poster, 2006, p. 33) as no religious, ethnic, or national requirements are needed to own media in the virtual space (p. 42). Moreover, new media help people bypass their physically determined identities, including disabilities (Cheung, 2007, p. 276). That the requirements are minimal helps undermine the guardians of culture who used to have the right to decide who can speak (Poster, 2006, p. 52). People who saturate everyday life with media in the virtual space are therefore no longer “others” (Ardevol, Roig, Cornelio, & Alsina, 2010, pp. 260-261).

Not being others, users become more powerful as they both produce and control meaning. It has been long argued that media consumption in general is not passive and audiences actively shape cultural meanings (Eco, 1979; Radway, 1991). New media have, however, helped cultural objects (e.g., photos, videos, text, and music) become “closer at hand and more amenable to modification, remix, and circulation through online networks” (Lange & Ito, 2010, p. 247). New media may therefore offer ways to subvert “the power of authors to control their work” (Poster, 2006, p. 19). Consuming works of other authors to produce new (and sometimes ‘aberrant’) meaning may help empower new media users (cf. Eco, 1993). In other words, new media, through separating cultural objects from their context, give users the power to resignify cultural objects and produce meaning (Poster, 2006, pp. 238-239) (cf. Harries, 2008; Jenkins, 2004, 2008; Marshall, 2004). In his ethnography of *Second Life*, an online virtual world, Boellstorff (2008) calls the concurrency of consumption and production in the virtual space “prosumption.” He (p. 208) argues that users on the virtual world of *Second Life* produce what they consume

and turn consumption into a form of production. Therefore, the subject is understood to be a creator. He holds that prosumption explains why in Second Life “creativity was linked to self-expression and thus freedom: when residents would say things like ‘there is a lot of freedom here, in many more ways than rl [real life],’ the freedom to create was what they usually referenced” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 211) (cf. Lange & Ito, 2010, p. 256 for a similar process in creating individual profiles on social networks).

Likewise, Ardevol and colleagues (2010, p. 267) maintain that there is a playful component in the ordinary people’s media production and creativity in the virtual space. They define this playful component as the pleasure of immersion driving from articulation of the audiovisual experience with the embodiment and the feeling of agency and control (p. 266). Since this playful component of media production causes the rules set by the original producers to be transgressed and new games to be born, play is considered to have a transformative and hence empowering quality (p. 268). For example, in the case of *French Democracy*,⁵³ Alex Chan, a ‘prosumer,’ altered a game engine in order to tell his own version of the series of incidences that led to the riots on the outskirts of French cities in 2005. The designer of *French Democracy* did not play within the game system; he altered the game and turned it to a *machinima*,⁵⁴ so he could narrate his own point of view. Ardevol and colleagues conclude that the transformative practices of playing with media are cultural performances that create new opportunities to disrupt the existing relations of power between individuals and media institutions (p.

⁵³ The video is accessible at this address with English subtitles:
<http://archive.org/details/thefrenchdemocracy>

⁵⁴ Machinima is the art of creating cinematic productions by using real-time computer graphics engines, mostly those of video games.

276). However, they point out that the emphasis on the blurring distinction between producers and audiences should not mislead one into failing to notice the power that media corporations still have to decide and legitimize what constitutes relevant cultural content. Similarly, Jenkins (2002, p. 157) states that prosumers are “not autonomous, still operating alongside powerful media industries.”

By facilitating production of meaning, new media also help prosumers or interactive audiences create selves and realize their power. Boellstorff’s (2008, p. 120) ethnography of Second Life shows that the production activities facilitated by new media can take an inward form and turns into creation of selves. Turkle (2011, p. 158) similarly maintains that online social worlds provide new material to rework identities. However, the best depiction of this process, albeit not in a virtual space, is perhaps Abu-Lughod’s (2002b) study of television melodramas in Egypt. Her study demonstrates an example of the new forms of bottom-top and positive power (in terms of creating selves) media provide. She observes that melodrama introduces a new way of staging and perhaps shaping selfhood in Egypt (p. 117). Melodrama in Egypt therefore functions as a technology for the creation of new selves (Foucault, 1988b). Drawing upon Peter Brooks’s (1985) explanation of melodrama as “the central fact of the modern sensibility,” Abu-Lughod argues that although melodramas convey moral messages inflected by national ideologies, they also create a “modern sensibility” in their viewers through “popularizing a distinctive configuration of narrative, emotion, and subjectivity” (p. 116). However, since this modern subjectivity is crafted in a society that idealized the embeddedness of individuals in kin and family, Abu-Lughod warns that one should be

wary of telling any unilineal stories about modernity, melodrama and individuality (p. 116).

Abu-Lughod writes that television leads Egyptians to see their own daily lives as dramas (p. 118). While telling their stories, the Egyptians make themselves the subject, the melodramatic heroes and heroines, of their own lives (p. 124). The representation of melodramatic characters' emotions provides a model for a new kind of individualized subject that has a rich inner life and an intense individuality (p. 117). This results in new modes of subjectivity and new discourses of personhood that might be called modern because of its emphasis on the individual. The main feature of the modern subject as it has been understood in the West is one's ability to verbalize him or herself—i.e., one's ability to give an account of oneself. The media form of melodrama has provided different means for verbalizing the self. The materials melodrama has introduced to the Egyptians to construct or conceptualize selves are thus different from other popular Arab cultural forms which are conventional, formulaic, and depersonalized (pp. 119-121).

By closely studying the specific cultural context in which a specific medium is used, Abu-Lughod's study shows how and to what extent the medium of television melodrama empowers people by providing them with a new means to create selves. Likewise, although differently due to different affordances each medium offers, new digital media generally empower users in virtual spaces by facilitating users' participation and their contribution to meaning making (e.g., in French Democracy) as well as offering new ways of self-creation (e.g., in Second Life). However, at the same time they may retain power inequalities and hierarchies (e.g., in the Persian blogosphere) or create new forms of inequality (e.g., in MUDs).

2-6- METHODS

Until recently the extension of the notion of the anthropological field to include cyberspace that started in the 1990s (Fischer, 2007) seemed to be relatively new and therefore anthropologists did not uniformly hold the same opinion about the suitable methodological strategy and approach appropriate for the study of cyberspace. Partially because of the different topics they studied and partly due to their theoretical perception of cyberspace, ethnographers understood it differently. For some scholars (Hine, 2005; D. Miller, 2011; D. Miller & Slater, 2000), the virtual was thinkable only as embedded in a specific geographic place and hence informants' online activities could not be separated from their offline lives. These researchers usually advocated techniques that enabled them to participate in the informants' *real* life activities and observe them in the actual world while they were engaging in online activities. According to this approach, new media (in my case, blogs) do not represent new realities; they are just new mediations. On the other hand, the second methodological approach, most famously applied by Boellstorff (2008) in his study on Second Life supported the idea of doing research entirely within virtual worlds. In this approach, online activities should be studied in their own terms through "in-world" ethnographic methods. Therefore, cyberspace is not to be connected to the actual world, because cyberspace, in itself, is a culture that must be studied like any other culture by means of classic ethnographic techniques.

However, the methodological question in response to which these two approaches were used eventually lost its initial significance, because the more ubiquitous social media and other online activities became in the everyday lives of both ethnographers and

their informants, the more once-novel method of online ethnography turned into yet another classic research strategy in the ethnographer's toolkit. Ethnographic documentation of social life in cyberspace now sounds as ordinary as documentation of social life in actual world.

Given that the Persian blogosphere has its own distinct cultures (although, they are not independent of the cultures of the actual world and those in other online media), I studied it in its own terms. The methods, techniques, and strategies I used for my field research were the familiar classic ethnographic ones. However, benefiting from the flexibility of ethnographic methods, similar to actual world ethnographers who adjust standard methods so they fit the particular setting of the research, I adjusted the well-familiar customary ethnographic strategies so they fit both the unique setting of my research and the tools through which I had access to my informants.

At times, especially in the beginning of my fieldwork, I observed activities without participation to have a better understanding of my field site's different cultures and segments, learn about their norms, know the key people in different niches of my field site, and decide with whom I should work closely for the purpose of the research. The online setting of my field site let me learn about the bloggers in more details than it is usually achievable in actual world contexts, by non-obtrusively (Kozinets, 2002) (for the lack of a better word) "lurking" into their activities and interactions (Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, & Yan, 2009, p. 58). As a participant-observer, I immersed myself in the Persian blogosphere whose cultures are as deep and rich as those of actual world. Experiencing the community and its everyday life first-hand, I engaged in long-term interactions with Iranian bloggers. I participated in blogging-related activities (including

commenting on blogs, blogging about my thoughts as well as some of my research findings, participating in ‘blogging games’ (*bāzī-hā-ye veblāgī*) in which one is invited by another blogger to write about a specific theme and subsequently asks certain fellow bloggers to do so, celebrating the Persian Blogging Day by writing about what blogging means to me, etc.), observed bloggers when writing in their own blogs mostly through Skype’s Share Screen function, and also interviewed bloggers.

Nonetheless, for the purpose of this research, I did not meet, in the actual world, bloggers with whom I worked. In some cases, I did not see the faces of my informants when communicating via instant messaging services or exchanging comments on blogs. Also, although in other cases we talked via video chat services, I did not necessarily know anything about their actual world identities beyond what they had already shared in their blogs. Yet in other cases, they shared with me information about their life history that they had not shared on their blogs. Finally, in some cases, I did not know the real names of bloggers with whom I worked, just like bloggers themselves who despite being in constant contact with fellow bloggers may not always know their *real* identities and names.

Although I believe that the Persian blogosphere on its own provides context for my research as it is a “legitimate site of culture” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 61), it does not mean that I paid no attention to the larger context of my field site, including the political, literary, historical, economic, national, and international contexts. Similar to actual-world ethnographic research, I studied that context through secondary research. Perceiving it as a good opportunity to understand the dominant writing ideology taught in schools, I also agreed to participate in authoring a Writing Skills textbook for Iranian students. This was

the only primary research (including participation-observation and interviewing) I carried out that was not directly related to the activities within my field site, the Persian blogosphere.

In addition to theoretical goals, logistical reasons, plainly speaking to the international political context in which I conducted my study, defined my research agenda and constrained the tools through which I was able to access my informants. Because of my single entry student visa, there existed the risk of not being able to return to my academic institution if I leave the US to conduct my research inside Iran. As such, my research developed online and I carried out 'ethnography at a distance' (although, one may argue, online ethnography cannot by definition be considered as such). My instruments of research were limited to online tools, including but not limited to blogging itself. As I described above, my ethnography at a distance however did not preclude the use of classic ethnographic techniques of participant-observation and interviewing through which I gained insight into my informants' view of blogging. Although relatively slow and at the expense of instant follow-up questions, email interviews and group discussions were particularly convenient for my informants as they were able to give more thoughtful responses at their convenience. Also, since text-based communication was the natural, principal communication method used by my informants, they seemed to feel more comfortable with email or text-based instant messaging applications. All in all, I used online instruments to observe, record, and analyze actual transformations, which bloggers bring about to themselves by writing self-centering narratives in their blogs. I also employed these tools to analyze reproduction of and changes in power relations in

the wake of new modes of subjectivity enabling individuals to realize their significance as they put themselves at the center of their narratives.

Instead of new research techniques, I hope the methodological contribution of my research derives from the additional attention I paid in my field study to incongruous practices and cases. As it is hopefully clear in the ethnographic evidence in the following chapters, instead of dismissing unique interactions and observations as insignificant outliers, I intentionally took them extremely seriously as I believed they were events well worthy of observation and analysis yet overlooked in existing accounts. My interest in incongruous cases has been partially shaped by my theoretical understanding of the topic of my research—i.e., communication through technological media. In communication theories, although the so-called oddness—usually dismissed as noise—threatens the reliability of the original message, at the same time it makes possible new interpretations and therefore new information by boosting the complexity of the system (Geroulanos & Meyers, 2011). I used to informally and half-jokingly call this approach to research that takes *weird* findings seriously, ‘pants hem ethnography’ (*mardom-negārī-ye sejāf-šalvārī*, which I believe is a funnier term in Persian) until I recently found out in a blogpost⁵⁵ by Nicolas Nova, a design anthropologist based in Geneva, that this approach has been given a similar but more appropriate title, ‘peripheral ethnography.’ For me, the epigraph to this chapter, a verse by the 14th century Iranian poet Hafez, epitomizes this approach to research where instead of stressing the all-too-well-known patterns revealed

⁵⁵ <https://goo.gl/jpGiyf>

by the old habits of research and somehow rendered as *new* discoveries, the researcher achieves the goal of expanding his or her knowledge by paying attention to odd findings.

I used to call this approach ‘pants hem ethnography’ because the hem of a pair of pants, which is turned and sewn underneath (and as such is hidden and forgotten and seems insignificant compared to the cloth itself), is what one must resort to, unsew, and carefully study if one wants to enlarge and potentially salvage the cloth (at least, it is how in my untrained imagination tailors alter clothes). Although it sounds like a terrible analogy, the hem of the filed findings, the seemingly unimportant and overlooked information on the fringe, is what anthropologists need to turn to if they want to expand and enlarge their knowledge of their field sites and augment it in complexity. It is why, according to Nova, peripheral ethnography is interested in “marginal practices, peculiar behaviors, curious rituals, odd appropriation/repurposing of technologies, little things that people talk less about, situations in which technical objects age, things that do not fit, [and] intriguing artifacts.” As the dual meaning of peripheral, as both ‘on the edge of something’ and ‘of secondary importance and therefore overlooked,’ implies, peripheral ethnography hopes to expand our knowledge of the topic by examining what is on the edge and boundaries of our knowledge. In other words, peripheral ethnography hopes “that addressing practices and things which be [sic.] relatively peripheral (and discussing this aspect with informants), and contrasting this to more standard observations, helps to understand cultures ‘en devenir’.”

شب به روی جاذبهی نمناک
ای بسا پرسیده‌ام از خود
«زندگی آیا درون سایه‌ها مان رنگ می‌گیرد؟
یا که ما خود سایه‌های سایه‌های خویش‌تن هستیم؟»

- فروغ فرخزاد

*On the wet path at night,
I have often asked
Myself: "Does life find form
Inside our shadows?
Are we not the shadows of our own shadows?"*
- Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967)

3

Chapter 3: The Between

3-1- INTRODUCTION

“EDITOR: MYSELF” (*SARDABĪR: XODAM*) WAS the title of a pioneer and perhaps the best-known Iranian blog whose blogger, Hossein Derakhshan, played a historic role in popularizing the technology of online writing in the Persian speaking world. The “editor” half of the title has guided many to understand blogging in Iran in terms related to

journalism. They have consequently discussed blogging's consequences for politics and macro relations of power. Assisting political change, blogging in this sense has been appreciated as an accessible medium making up for nonexistent free press.⁵⁶

Similar to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 that benefited from printed leaflets containing Ayatollah Khomeini's statements and copied audio cassettes of his speeches (Sreberny & Mohammadi, 1994), the Green Movement of 2009 gained from the social media of the Internet (Fischer, 2010), including blogs.⁵⁷ However, in this chapter, I focus on the "myself" half of the title of that pioneer Iranian blog as it, in my view, better describes the nature and function of blogs that I studied during my fieldwork. Not overtly political, the bloggers of these blogs were mostly engaged in writing about their daily lives.

I argue in this chapter that the 'myself' part of the title guides us to understand how blogging helped Iranian bloggers fashion *autonomous* selves. In the sections that follow, I concentrate on the micro relations of control and the transformations in the structure of power outside the realm of formal politics and link these changes to the emergence of blogging as a specific technology of writing. Many studies of blogging in

⁵⁶ Beyond the Persian blogosphere, while writing the first draft of this chapter in June and July 2016, social media of the Internet proved itself significant in grassroots and formal political transformation again in the US and the Middle East. In June, House Democrats broadcast their sit-in on Periscope (<https://goo.gl/ogsGV1>) defying the shutdown of television cameras. In July, Diamond Reynolds live-streamed on Facebook the aftermath of the police shooting in which her fiancé, Philando Castile, died (<http://goo.gl/t0dIC2>). In the same month, President Erdoğan of Turkey (who ironically was criticized for suppressing social media in his country) was successful in foiling an attempted coup partially because he appeared on CNN Turk via Facebook Live when the army had taken over the state television and he was away vacationing in the resort town of Marmaris (<http://goo.gl/4YUEpZ>).

⁵⁷ A shift from 'diary-like blogging' to 'blogs as news sources' took place in the wake of the Green Movement of 2009 when the need for easily accessible news was urgently felt. Many bloggers turned their blogs that in many cases used to be a place for writing about the bloggers' daily lives into accessible media to spread the news of the movement.

Iran have focused on its political effects. This is not the focus of my study. Without rejecting the larger, more formal political consequences of the technology, my approach simply starts with micro politics and works backward to point out (in passing) the changes in macro politics. In other words, it focuses on political consequences in terms of ramifications of the emergence of new subjectivities created through caring for one's self in one's blog. This view is in line with Foucault's (1988b, p. 20) description of the relationship between one's occupation with oneself and one's occupation with the city in the classical Greek philosophy, especially that of Aristotle and Plato.⁵⁸

This chapter, more generally, draws on the Foucauldian (1984, 1986, 1988a, 1988b) rediscovery of the significance of care for the self in the Greek and Christian traditions. Drawing upon Foucault's later works,⁵⁹ I conceive of the practices of blogging I observed as a way through which bloggers turn themselves into subjects (Foucault, 1982, p. 778). Blogging in other words is a technology of the self as it is used to fashion, develop and transform the self (Foucault, 1986, p. 46). Blogging allows "individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault, 1988b, p. 18). The notion of the technologies of the self in fact

⁵⁸ This relationship (that those who occupy themselves with their selves make better citizens) is articulated most clearly in *Alcibiades I* and also in *Apology*.

⁵⁹ While the early Foucault is known for his work on power, the later Foucault is generally acknowledged as a researcher of the subject. In 1982, Foucault famously stated that the general theme of his research is not power, but the subject (Foucault, 1982, p. 778). While the constitution of subjects through tactics of power and knowledge is at the heart of the work of the early Foucault, self-subjectivation (Foucault, 2005, p. 214) characterizes his later studies. The subject now is not simply constituted but constitutes itself. For a critique of this view of subjectivation that is separate from the symbolic order see (Žižek, 1999, p. 251f).

highlights particular practices (and not simply attitudes, advice, or principles) that in Greek were collectively called *epimelēsthai sautou* (Foucault, 1986, p. 47; 1988b, p. 19). Showing an inversion of hierarchy between the two principles of “take care of yourself” and “know yourself,” Foucault (1988b) argues that the former gave its place in Western thought to the Delphic latter which in the past used to be only a consequence of the activities associated with the care of self.⁶⁰

Foucault identifies writing, among other things, as a certain historical practice for the care of the self. He writes that “around the care of the self, there developed an entire activity of speaking and writing in which the work of oneself on oneself and communication with others were linked together.” These acts of writing and speaking, more importantly, constituted, not “exercise[s] in solitude, but [...] true social practice[s]” (Foucault, 1986, p. 51). Akin to the blogging practices of many bloggers in the Persian blogosphere, Foucault (1988b, p. 27) states that “one of the main features of taking care involved taking notes on oneself to be reread, writing treatises and letters to friends to help them, and keeping notebooks in order to reactivate for oneself the truths one needed.” He continues that as introspection became more detailed and self-analysis became important in the first and second century, “a relation developed between writing and vigilance. Attention was paid to nuances of life, mood, and reading, and the experience of oneself was intensified and widened by virtue of this act of writing. A whole field of experience opened which earlier was absent” (1988b, p. 28).

⁶⁰ In prevalent Islamic ethics, “knowing one’s self” (*xod-šenāsi*) is usually understood as a prerequisite for “building one’s self” (*xod-sāzi*) (Bahonar, 1991 [1370]). In this understanding, knowledge (*šenāxt*) about the self that can be gained through reasoning (*ma’refat-e āfāqī*) or introspection (*ma’refat-e anfosī*) (Rahimian, 2005 [1384]) comes before practice.

In this chapter, to more clearly show that writing, and more specifically blogging, functions as a technology of the self, I focus on blogposts written throughout some life-changing events as these examples more visibly demonstrate the processes of self-fashioning and self-transformation. In the wake of life-changing events when the world around one no longer seems to make sense, self-fashioning is more direly required in order for one to comprehend the changing situation as conventionalized discursive strategies can no longer meaningfully articulate one's past (Crapanzano, 1996, p. 107). These events, in the words of one of the pioneers of literary self-fashioning studies, are the "turning points or crises" (Greenblatt, 2005, p. 6) of one's life due to which one is "displaced in significant ways" (Greenblatt, 2005, p. 8) from a relatively stable personal life.

I therefore argue that blogging, as a technology of the self, contributes to a process of self-fashioning that yields a subject capable of self-sufficiently expressing his or her own true interiority (or, in fact, a subject with the illusion of such control and such interiority. I address the illusion of control and self-mastery in the next two chapters). The emergence of this specific subject has political implications both for micro and macro relations of power. When it comes to micro relations of power, although the technology of blogging disturbs interpersonal or intergroup relations of power as it introduces ambiguity to the established power structures, it is simultaneously used by those whose power is in jeopardy to salvage their authority. Therefore, there is a struggle over power that hints at the possibility that democracy in the Persian blogosphere at times might come at the price of silencing (or attempting to silence) others. When it comes to macro relations of power, blogging plays an important role especially because in Iran the

new subjectivities capable of self-sufficiently expressing their interiority emerge against the background of an *ommat*—a political system organized around an *emām* who is considered to better understand than his followers their interiorities (the destination of their selves, *nafs*, when it moves along the “straight path,” *serāt-e mostaqim*, away from *nafs-e ammāre* guiding people to engage in immoral behavior, toward *nafs-e sāfiye*, the perfect, purified soul), their interests, and needs⁶¹ and as such, in some interpretations, must function as their guardian (*qayyem* or *valī*).⁶²

In the sections that follow, I moreover argue that in the context of Iranian culture, the creation of these new subjectivities capable of expressing their *true* selves is partially a result of the between place of blogging—most importantly in-between public and private. In the existing accounts of the Persian blogosphere, blogging is typically contrasted to conventional media in which the former is more accessible for reflecting true identities of the users. However, the *place* of the technological medium has been mostly overlooked. In the context of Iran’s culture, the dialectic of public and private (as well as meaning and event that is a characteristic of all acts of writing (Ricoeur, 1976)), is

⁶¹ This is not limited to political power. As I was writing the first draft of the current chapter in July 2016, students and their families in different cities in Iran gathered to object (<http://goo.gl/LrcZMu>) to the department of education’s (*āmūzeš va parvareš*) new plan, The Educational Guidance Program (*hedāyat-e tahsīlī*) according to which ninth grade students are forced to choose their majors (*rešte*), including natural sciences, mathematics and physics, humanities, and also vocational school, based on the recommendations of school advisors who with the help of *scientific* tests know students better than students know themselves. A deputy to the minister of education justified the program in an interview by citing that one third of the advisors have master degrees or PhDs (<http://goo.gl/hLzla9>). Additionally, the program is based on the belief that one’s interest comes secondary to the country’s needs and its development plans.

⁶² The discussion of the necessity of a *qayyem* to lead the *ommat* is reflected in the theory of the guardianship of the chief jurisprudence that is the political theoretical basis for the current structure of power in Iran. However, the meaning of *qayyem* has been disputed. While some take it to mean the protector of incapables (*qayyem-e mahjūrīn*), others consider it to be the overseer of the wise (*sarparast-e olul-albāb*). For instance, see this textual reproduction of a series of lectures by Ayatollah Javadi Amoli, a renowned Iranian Twelver Shi’a religious reference (*marja’*), on the discourse of religious governance: <http://goo.gl/iGSeig>

amplified in the in-between place of blogging that encourages the public expression (linked to the cultural notion of *zāher*, surface, and exterior) of the blogger's true interiority (linked to the category of *bāten*, the internal, and inside). Borrowing the term from Heidegger (1971b, p. 154), I look at this in-between place or boundary as a horizon or a place from which a new subjectivity "*begins its presencing.*" The in-betweenness of blogging also manifests itself in other situations that collectively contribute to its *virtual* nature. By virtual here I do not refer to blogging as an online (and therefore not *actual*) practice of writing. Following Boellstorff (2008), I take virtual here to mean *almost* (and therefore not perfect, determinate, and pure). The virtual nature of blogging thus lends to its ambiguity whose one manifestation is its in-betweenness.

Ethnographic and textual evidence based on interviews, email group discussions, and blogposts provides support for my arguments in this chapter. Reading blogposts with bloggers who had originally written them, I look beyond simple denotational references grounded in a "representationalist belief in the power of words to mirror preexisting phenomena" (Barad, 2003, p. 802) for the traces of the interactions between the blogposts, the blogger, and other co(n)texts (Silverstein & Urban, 1996, p. 5) to have a better sense of the entextualization of these texts.

3-2- IN THE WAKE OF CRISIS

Take the following two vignettes that I have assembled based on the blogposts of two Iranian bloggers, Afsoon and Iman. At the heart of the two stories are two life crises, the

events of falling in love and the death of a family member, respectively. Later, I will draw on these two vignettes to show how blogging contributes to the creation of selves.

3-2-1- Love

The first life story started on a late winter day, a couple of weeks before Nowrouz (Persian New Year's) holidays, when Afsoon fell in love with a classmate. Echoing the tumultuous streets outside—that usually became even more hectic during the days preceding Nowrouz—inside herself, Afsoon was feeling chaos—a roller coaster of emotions: love and hate, fear and courage, joy and sadness, misery and power. She had never felt that many, that strong feelings at once. “It was too much for me to endure. I could not breathe,” she remarked. The love she felt in her heart for her classmate had turned her world upside down. Keeping the feelings cornered inside was unbearable, but talking with others about them was also not an option. A week ago she was just fine, awaiting New Year's celebrations. Now she was a mess, imploding, without having a crying shoulder, a listening ear, or a helping hand. In the college (*dāneškade*) there was already ample romantic rivalry. Three and a half semesters into their program, everyone in her 100-something-student cohort was basically in love with a class-colleague and had already broken up with someone else who was now in love with a friend—although people were typically reluctant to call the current significant others of their ex-significant others friends. Afsoon was one of the very few who had vigilantly kept her distance from this situation and all the gossips and rumors it involved. She simply could not afford to be the subject of rumors and tragedies usually accompanying such romances. She was a principled kid (*bače mosbat*). Every step of her life had already been planned. She used

to go straight to her classes from home and go back home immediately after her last class—preferably by bus whose sections were gender-divided and not by share taxis where men and women sit side by side. The home was yet a less hospitable place for sharing her feelings. There was the horror of the thought of her conservative and *qeyratī*⁶³ father killing her, if he realized that she exchanged phone numbers with a class colleague (not to mention being in love with him). There was also the anxiety of thinking about her mother killing herself, if she learned about the disgrace she had brought on the family, especially since the boy she had fell for was not religious.

That day, Afsoon skipped her last class. In response to her friend’s inquiry, she only said she did not feel well and wanted to go home. But, unlike other days, she did not directly go home. Instead, she went outside and walked idly—something her family would not endorse even for her brothers, let alone for her. “Only prostitutes looking for customers wander in streets. You aren’t one of them; are you?” her father would ask. She nonetheless walked over an hour—an hour that felt like eternity—, cried the whole time, and almost got into a car accident. She got home barely before the usual time when her father, a well-to-do accountant, arrived every night from work—when everyone in the family regardless of their plans had to be back and soon after then be present at the dinner table. Her mother, a stay-at-home mom, scolded at her, but was happy that Afsoon was back just about in time to prevent a fight between her and her father. She did not eat much that night—and in fact for days after then. The New Year’s holidays came and went. She cried every day and night when saying her prayers. She felt powerful. She

⁶³ A *qeyratī* man is a protective father, brother, husband, fiancé, or son who protects the honor of the family by, among other things, punishing the womenfolk who bring shame to the family.

planned her escape from home, but never shared the plan with the guy lest she would scare him off. She felt miserable. She planned her suicide. She imagined the worst: “What if my dad dies one of these days of a heart attack,” she thought to herself. She prepared her suicide note. She was frightened. She composed herself to look physically good when seeing the guy after holidays. She started to constantly talk with him on phone and exchange text messages secretly. She still prudently did not talk with the guy more than a minute or two inside the college. She did not want the rumors to spread. She missed classes. She spent time inside the college’s women’s prayer room (*namāzxūne*) and if possible on benches in city parks where she wrote many love letters. She got awful grades. She studied with the guy outside the college. They secretly held hands. She taught herself how to enjoy her time with him without letting her family know about the situation. She kissed the guy one evening before they parted ways. Another day, the morals police detained them briefly in the police’s vans. She was scared to death but still managed for the family not to be informed.

She finally slept with the guy. He casually invited her to his parents’ house when no one was home. Knowing it would end up in sex, she accepted the invitation. They slept together that day. She felt extremely guilty. All of her father’s admonition on her being like a prostitute only because she does not get home in time was being repeated in her head. She had asked God in her prayers to make the guy love her back. But an intimate relationship with him was not something God would condone. She felt extremely guilty, but had sex with him again nevertheless. She kept experiencing many pleasures of bodily love.

3-2-2- Death

In the second life story unrelated to that of Afsoon, on a gloomy day in the same year when Afsoon for the very first time slept with her boyfriend, Iman's father died. His uncle called him several times when he was in class. He received a text message from him asking Iman to call back immediately. He left the classroom and made the call. When his uncle told him he should take the first intercity bus to go home in Northwestern Iran as soon as possible because his father did not feel well, he simply realized the bitter truth. The uncle only wanted to be thoughtful. He did not want Iman to know the truth at once now that he was far from his family. After all, it is a normal cultural practice in Iran. Bad news is better received if it is delivered gradually. Also, his uncle did not want to be the one delivering it. Knowing all that, Iman had not still lost all hope, though. "Maybe he has only grown sicker. Like the last time after which he somewhat recovered," he thought to himself. He begged his uncle to tell him the truth. "Is my dad gone, *Da'i*?⁶⁴ Swear on the grave of Maman Joon to tell me the truth," he asked. His uncle burst out crying after a few moments of silence. Iman's knees buckled. He sat on the ground. It was one of those gloomy days that you felt the sky also wanted to cry with you. Iman cried with his uncle on the other end of the call who after a while composed himself and started to give Iman advice and courage: "Your father no longer is in pain. He is now at peace. You should be strong. Lean on God (*be xodā tavakol kon*). You are a grown man. Your mom and your siblings need you more than ever now and you must act like a real man." Iman hardly remembered what he said to his uncle in response. He only

⁶⁴ *Da'i* means maternal uncle.

remembered that he was whispering between lips “I’m now an orphan.” Perhaps it was all his uncle could hear too.

He managed to take his belongings out of the classroom and got himself to the bus terminal across the town. When he got to his parents’ house, everyone was crying. He cried with his mom. He cried with his siblings. He talked with friend who offered condolences. It took many months for him to come to terms with the reality of his father’s death during which he felt regret, anger, sadness, and angst. Although he had not seen his father often lately and was rather aware that he would die soon due to his chronic illness, nothing seemed the same to him after his father’s death. “I never felt again that there would be anybody in the world that I could truly lean on,” he said. But finally, as time passed, Iman felt content. He was at peace with himself most of the time. He started to think more seriously about death—especially his own death. He scrutinized all his actions. He wanted to be sure he was doing right deeds and thinking right thoughts. He did not want to be regretful when his time would come. “Many people die immaturely every day. One should always be ready,” he remarked. “You must always weigh yourself before you are weighted on the Day of Judgment,” he said referring to Nahj al-Balagha’s (the collection of sermons and letters by Imam Ali, the first Shia’^a imam) 90th sermon. He started to fast. But fasting was no longer only a ritual. He thought about its purpose and fasted whenever he could—even outside the month of Ramazān—and sent the spiritual reward (*savāb*) of his extra fasting days to his deceased dad’s soul. If he made a mistake in his social interactions or in his personal deeds, he reminded himself of the mistake so he would never repeat it again. He forced himself to do good deeds too. He worked hard to help others. He did not necessarily become more religious. He believed in

God before his father's death. However, he started to say his prayers whole-heartedly now—or at least, he tried. He did not want anything to distract him during his prayers, so as much as possible he said them in the same familiar spots at his room and in the college every day to avoid unfamiliar distractions. He said every prayer twice, once for himself and once on his late father's behalf.

The two vignettes, one about Afsoon and the other one about Iman, seem not to have much in common, probably other than that the people at the center of the two stories are roughly of the same age and that the events took place approximately during the same period of time. After all, while one is about a young woman from a religiously conservative and patriarchal family experiencing love in all its aspects for the very first time (a “forbidden” love about which she is frightened to talk with people around her), the other focuses on a young man, not necessarily conservatively religious, whose father's death leaves a huge dent in his spiritual life—an effect that turns him into a person feeling deeply accountable for all of his actions. However, one element common in the two stories that I did not point to is that during their ordeals both Afsoon and Iman were blogging almost every day and sometimes several times on the same day about these events. It is not accidental that these stories coming from blogs look like the plot of a film.

3-3- HEROES AND HEROINES OF THEIR OWN STORIES

If the two snippets are seen in their contexts as extracted from a series of blogposts (and edited to produce a linear cohesive narration), more commonalities between the two begin to surface. First, we know about these two stories because Afsoon and Iman wrote about and throughout their troubles in their blogs. Second, the stories recount the aftermath of two substantial, life-changing events—love and death—due to which things that previously made sense no longer seemed right. Third, as they tell familiar life episodes, the stories are filled to the brim with emotions (to the extent that sometimes re-reading them brought tears to the bloggers' eyes) and told in a melodramatic fashion. In fact, I told the stories in an exaggerated soap opera fashion to mimic the somewhat stereotypical and sometimes overly-sentimental narration of the original stories. A forbidden love, a girl discovering the miracle of a kiss far from the eyes of her oppressive family, a father threatening to engage in honor killing, an alarming death awakening a young man's sense of purpose, a self requiring to be scrutinized all the time because an unrestrained self is devilish, a young man deciphering the meaning of life on his own—all may seem like material for second-rate fiction or, to be more generous, phrases taken from a review of an Iranian (or any Middle Eastern, for that matter) movie exclusively made to win awards from foreign film festivals. Fourth, in contrast to the clichéd themes, the hero and heroine of the stories are realistically drawn, ordinary people. They are college students the like of whom one may find in every Iranian family. However, although they are not protagonists of epic tales engaged in ordeals, they have unique life histories and experiences that are in fact extraordinary, worthy of being made into films.

“I swear to god; they should make a movie based on my life (*bexodā bāyad az zendegī-ye man film besāzan*),” remarked Afsoon.

What are we to make of these commonalities? How do the similarities between the stories of lived experiences told in blogs guide us to understand what Iranian bloggers do in the Persian blogosphere? Or even beyond that, what happens to bloggers’ lives when everything looks like blogposts to them? I next elaborate on the four observations I made here to answer these questions.

First, we know about the stories narrated in these blogs, a version of which I shared here,⁶⁵ because Afsoon and Iman blogged about the troubles, reliefs, rewards, and punishments of love and death as the events were unfolding. Probably blogging *about* these events is not an accurate description of their practices of giving an account of their stories, for it implies the temporal precedence of the events over their representation in the blogposts and assumes “events as somehow antecedent or logically prior to the narratives that recount them” (Bauman, 1986, p. 5). In reality though, not only does one may consider the events they were blogging to be “abstractions from narrative” (Bauman, 1986, p. 5), but also the act of blogging and giving an account of those events was not necessarily separate from the events themselves. My interlocutors’ blogging was enmeshed in the course of their ordeals. Blogging was part of their lives that happened to be heavily affected by the crises with which they were dealing at the time. Therefore, in the vignettes above, for example, Afsoon’s praying was not limited to saying prayers and

⁶⁵ Beyond the familiar critique and question of ethnographic representation, my telling of the two bloggers’ stories also poses an additional question: what dialogical interactions took place between me and the life histories of the two as I gave a more cohesive, linear account of the fragmented blogposts?

raising arms to praise God on her prayer's mat, a dear memento of her late grandmother, about which we know because she had reported it in her blog. It also included literal prayers in her blog: "O God! I don't know with what other language I should ask it from you, but everyone says you help those in love. You listen to my cries and save me, just now (*xodāyā! nemīdūnam bā če zabūnī dīge azat bexām. valī hame mīgan to yār-e āšeqāyī. xodet hamīn hālā be faryādam beres*)." Likewise, when I reported in the vignette that Iman paid attention to his mistakes, so he would not repeat them in the future, I both meant he took a mental note of what he did and also actually wrote it down in his blog to remember it: "It was a bad day. I had a fight with the bank teller [...] It wasn't my fault. She provoked my anger to say those nasty things. But I could have stopped myself (*mītūnestam jelo-ye xodam ro begīram*) [...] These days I get angry very easily. I think I have neglected myself again (*dobāre az xodam qāfel šodam*). I am writing it down here so I remember that it must be the last time I let myself get mad at people, no matter how insignificant or important the reason is." In other words, while reading their blogs, we do not simply read a report of unfolding events. Instead, the events were being performed and unfolded in the blogs. As such, despite what my telling of stories may suggest, in reality we do not simply read *about* the bloggers' emotions and thoughts in phrases that can easily summarize occurrences (e.g., "she wrote her suicide note"). We instead witness them performed (e.g., we read the note itself that was produced in the blog as a blogpost and moreover as readers we are asked to do some specific tasks, in case we hear of her suicide.).

Additionally, we know about these stories because in separate conversations, I, together with my interlocutors, revisited the stories while they walked me through the

relevant blogposts. In my many interactions with the two bloggers, they were most talkative and eager to share when together we were revisiting the posts. At times, it evoked strong emotions in them, but it also felt as if the archived blogposts energized them too, like when one looks at personal photos in an old family album. Although looking at old photos may make one sad, one may also start to tell a very proud, lively story based on the photos.

However, this pictorial metaphor should not be stretched to indicate that the blogposts simply reflected Afsoon's and Iman's interiority, just as photos reflecting the history of a family. Although an indication of their feelings, the blogposts were not X-ray images of the two bloggers' interior selves. The posts instead helped fashion selves by offering an organizing narrative to the bloggers' lived experiences and by engaging them in a melodramatic performance which I elaborate shortly. But at a very rudimentary level, it is fair to say that writing helped my interlocutors throughout their personal trials. In these and similar situations, bloggers' writings, for instance, altered their feelings. My informants believed that, in one way or another, writing changed something in them. It does not mean that writing functioned like a magic wand making worrying feelings disappear and desirable ones emerge in their place. Their writing still reflected what the bloggers felt, but they produced a permutation of those feelings at the same time. For example, writing gradually turned Iman's indescribable angst into a relatively explainable one. It is why my interlocutors confidently remarked several times that writing was always helpful to them because it had a therapeutic function (cf. S. Carr, 2006; Crapanzano, 1996, p. 108). In some cases, they vented their negative emotions and feelings through writing, and it calmed them down; in others, it helped them get the facts,

their available options, and possible solutions straight so they can make a decision (cf. Wilf, 2011); yet in others, it boosted their confidence in themselves by showing they were capable of achieving goals or are important (e.g., creating a loyal fandom for themselves). Reminiscent of Robert Frost's (1939, p. n. pag) famous reflection in the preface to a collection of his poems, blogging, in other words, offered them a "momentary stay against confusion." In describing a period involving a difficult career-related situation while studying abroad, an informant wrote that writing helped open his "air passage a little bit" (*komakam kard ye kam rāh-e nafasam bāz beše*). "If it weren't for writing [...], I would have been suffocated (*xafe mišodam*)," he said. Similarly, in remembering her troubles, Afsoon stated that she would not have been survived, if she had not blogged about her feelings:

Don't look at who I am now (*alānam ro nabīn*). It seems silly, but I wasn't the person who I am now. I was in love and excited. That is true. But I was also frightened. Very frightened. My brain really didn't have the capacity to hold all that was going on in my mind, leave alone analyzing it. Blogging was the only way I was able to think in a sensible manner about my problem⁶⁶ (*veblāg neveštan tanhā rāhī būd ke tūnestam be sūrat-e manteqī dar mored-e mas'ale-am fekr konam*). There were moments when I thought I would kill myself, but then I wrote about it and it calmed me down.

The help that blogging offered, even at this very basic level, contributed to the process of my interlocutors' self-fashioning which takes us to my second observation. The above-mentioned excerpts describe a process of change following some consequential, life-altering events. Although self-fashioning takes place in all acts of writing life stories (Crapanzano, 1996, p. 109), when a disorienting event takes place and

⁶⁶ In a different context, solving problems may literally mean scientific problem solving. See chapter 4, for a reference to the importance of using instruments, including writing tools, in solving science and math problems.

one uses writing as a form of Platonic (1991, p. 534) *dianoia* (*διανοία*) to make sense of the situation, the self-fashioning function of writing becomes more easily visible. In the wake of such events, the majority of things that usually made sense prior to the event loses meaning and sense. This makes a reorientation through self-fashioning necessary. It might then take place in the process of writing “self-centering narratives” (Crapanzano, 1996) as writing can make meaning and shape identities. The meaning-making capacity of writing, in turn, transforms the question of what blogposts represent to that of what they do. Blogposts do not simply represent emotions and thoughts, but rather create them. In other words, emotions and thoughts that went through the minds of my informants were not merely contents in search of a container, so they could be expressed. In the process of their expression in writing, the thoughts and emotions emerged as they were searching for meaning, or their meaning was reproduced or altered. Likewise, the words and sentences written in the blogposts were not simply carriers of thoughts and emotions. They were *things* in interaction with which my informants thought and felt.

“This one [...] I was weeping and writing, weeping and writing,” remembered Afsoon, when revisiting a certain blogpost in which she was desperately asking God for a revolution of sorts, a dramatic change, that may magically solve her problem. This was the blogpost in which “I sincerely asked God to give my dad a heart-attack (*az tah-e qalbam az xodā xāstam bābām sekte kone*),” she remarked and added “it seemed easier to make my mom agree to our eventual marriage, if my dad was dead. With my dad it was absolutely impossible.” Alluding to the co-emergence of her interior self and her writing, Afsoon then continued,

I didn't know where [this thought] came from. I would never wish someone's death—even my worst enemy. It's one of the first things I learned when a kid. Never ask for another person's death. But I was crying and blogging and I did write it. Not only that, but I also hit the “post” button. I was at a point in my life that I subconsciously (*nāxodāgah*) wished for my own dad's death. It scared me. When I was typing, all that I was seeing was a blurred picture of Shahrokh and Somayeh.⁶⁷ Has my love for [my boyfriend] really turned me into such a person? How far could I go to get what I wanted? I reread the post. I was frightened, but still I published it.

Shahrokh and Somayeh whom Afsoon pointed out in passing in our conversation but did not mention in the blogpost were two sixteen-year old lovers who became household names in 1997 after being arrested for murdering Somayeh's younger siblings in her family's house before an unsuccessful attempt at killing her mother. Afsoon should have heard of the “Crime of Gandhi Street” (*jenāyat-e xīyābān-e gāndī*), the title tabloids gave to the murders at the time when she was very young, probably seven- or eight-year old. It is because, in spite of the shock value of the story, it lasted as an everyday talking point among friends, strangers, and families alike for only a few months before it eventually disappeared from conversations when the now hot story of the election of Mohammad Khatami, the new reformist President, took over conversations. During the relatively short time it was part of daily conversations, Shahrokh and Somayeh's story left a huge mark in the psyche of Iranians. Parents and teachers who had never heard of a juvenile crime of this magnitude, started to more closely monitor the extrafamilial relations of their adolescent children and young students as they thought the crime might be indicative of a larger, contiguous social problem. Unable to give a definitive

⁶⁷ The blurred picture (*tasvīr-e mahv*) might refer to her blurry vision because she was crying or may be due to the fact that the published pictures of Shahrokh and Somayeh in newspapers were blurred (pixelated) to protect their identities.

explanation as to why two young high school students might commit such horrific murders, people came up with different theories. One explanation, specifically, blamed the crime on Somayeh's conservative family and their counterproductive anger at her for becoming friends with someone of the opposite sex, Shahrokh, whom she had apparently met in a neighborhood park—a place where *good girls* should not go unsupervised.

I do not know if this certain explanation indicating a larger historical, social, and media-related background was part of the reason Afsoon remembered the story of Shahrokh and Somayeh while thinking about her own situation with and against words she was blogging. But it is clear that writing in her blog contributed to the formation of a new, albeit always in flux, subjectivity as its perlocutionary effect (Austin, 1962) solicited a response from her, frightened but also convinced her of what she might have been capable, showed her who she was not, and ultimately helped the formation of an understanding of who she might have been. In a dialogical interaction between the narrated I and the narrating I (Crapanzano, 1996), *Afsoon* was fashioned as Afsoon responded to her own writing. In the process of blogging and simultaneously with it, connections and distinctions were performed, selections were made, and new relationships of imperfect opposition and partial association were negotiated. She blogged and in the process of writing her own words—embedded in a specific *old* media narrative and socio-political history—created meaning, although uncertain—a meaning that is required for a process of creation and recreation of a self that at least tentatively is relevant to the unfolding situation. As she was thinking with and against her words and was narrating her emotions and thoughts, her blogpost provided her with a vantage point from where she could look at the world outside and inside herself. Her words and her

subjectivity were, therefore, co-implicated and co-arising in a process of “intra-action” (Barad, 2006). By this I mean that Afsoon (her identity, the new transcendent viewpoint) and her blogpost mutually constructed one another. In other words, she was not *Afsoon* prior to this certain post (and any other blogpost, for that matter). *Afsoon* was not the person who she was before writing the blogpost because she was not able to give an account of herself as the available narrative (the narrative of a principled kid (*bače mosbat*) whose characteristics she numerated before concluding “to be fair, it was an easy life. There were some ellipses (*jā-xālī*) and all I had to do was simply to fill them with my name. [Afsoon] finishes her studies; [Afsoon] gets married to the son of a trusted family friend; [Afsoon] gets pregnant before her first wedding anniversary; [Afsoon] goes to her parents’ house with her husband and their kid the next year’s *eyd* [New Year’s]; etc.”) could not meaningfully articulate her new lived experiences. Likewise, the post also did not exist—even in her mind—before she became *Afsoon*.⁶⁸ Her blogpost by making a dialogue available and through providing her with a vantage point to look at her life was therefore responsible for her new self. Her situation in the midst of the crisis—the loss of meaning due to a narrative that did not provide her with a vantage point—forced her to succumb to her own words, the new narrative, and the meaning it had to offer.

Likewise, as auto-dialogues (Schlaeger, 2010), Iman’s blogposts focused mainly on his actions and interiority. Although they were written by Iman, they provided him with a position to talk back to himself as he used the blogposts to remember to what he

⁶⁸ In chapter 5, we see ethnographic examples of cases where thoughts do not exist before they are written.

needed to pay more attention and what he needed to avoid. As such, in his case, he mastered the “internal complexity by creating a textual practice in which the self would be able to talk to itself” (Schlaeger, 2010, p. 111). These examples show why blogposts written in the wake of disorienting events, more easily than their conventional counterparts, show us that blogs do not simply represent lived experiences of their bloggers; they instead contribute to the creation of those experiences.

For Afsoon, the process of narrating the ‘lived’ helped the dialectical transformation of event into meaning⁶⁹ (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 12). The meaning that she drew upon to have a vantage point (an identity) was created while the event was suppressed and surpassed in the process of writing (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 12). Therefore, as she was writing, the event of her troubles were canceled as something transient and retained as the same meaning which she used as a vantage point to make sense of the world around her. The enduring meaning, the meaning that arrested the transient event and stored it in itself, was now communicable to Afsoon in an act of soliloquy—a solitary discourse (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 15)—and to her readers in an ongoing dialogue, among others, in the comments sections of her blog. In her blogposts the utterly *private*, non-communicable experience of love and its troubles and rewards incomprehensible even to her now became *public*.

I will return to the question of public (meaning) and private (event) so innate to the act of writing (especially in blogs, but also in all acts of writing) and take a different tack to account for this dichotomy in the Persian blogosphere in the context of prevalent

⁶⁹ If Peirce’s broader semiotics is to be followed, Ricoeurian event and meaning are specific examples of object and interpretant, respectively, while writing (as discourse) is a Peircean representamen.

culture in Iran. However, before that, I would like to draw attentions to the performativity of blogging ensuing an approach to blogposts that views them as discourses capable of doing things (including through perlocutionary effect) (cf. Barad, 2003 for her understanding of performativity as a way to challenge the views that grant language too much power in deciding our ontologies). The consideration of my interlocutors' blogging as performances subsequently highlights the type of performance in which they were engaged to make sense of their selves in a confusing situation, which is critical to the last two observations I mentioned in the beginning of this section.

Iman's and Afsoon's descriptions of the situations reminded me (and also themselves as we have already seen) of melodramatic stories—like the ones, on a more collective level, tabloids created by categorizing people as either victims or innocents in the Crime of Gandhi Street, so they can help produce and mediate an understanding of the world (Marcantonio, 2015, p. 1) for confused readers who could not make sense of this seemingly senseless crime. The life stories of my interlocutors, like those of many others, were saturated with experiences melodramatically shaped. Like many others, my interlocutors could experience their lives as a melodramatic film (Pandian, 2015, p. 2). Similar to melodrama, the characters in Afsoon's and Iman's stories, both good and evil, are ordinary people. But, in spite of their ordinariness, the focus of the stories is the blogger himself or herself, the hero and heroine of the narrative. Everyone else, no matter how frequently he or she appears in the blogposts, is simply a guest actor or actress. The individual blogger is the one whose emotions, thoughts, and activities are important and at the center of the story. While Iman's blogposts intended to put strict restrictions on his

actions, Afsoon's blogposts encouraged her to act more freely. However, in both blogs, the bloggers—and their interiorities—were at the center of narratives.

Moreover, although unlike in melodrama, the bloggers' stories were not limited in length as they constantly, albeit at different rates, were adding to their stories, like in melodrama the moral message of each sub-story was periodically stated in an obvious fashion and received (and at times contested) by the blogger and his or her readers. Furthermore, heightened emotionalism characterizes both melodrama and the stories narrated in blogs. Emotionalism is more obvious in my (and their own) telling of the two bloggers' stories as the bloggers wrote in the wake of emotionally charged events. However, heightened emotionalism can also be observed in other types of blogging. This feature of blogging in Iran was sometimes ridiculed as *čos-nāle-hā-ye veblāgī*, whose translation as 'fake blog groans' does not adequately convey the humor and vulgarity of the original phrase. Given these similarities, it is fair to classify the blogged stories as melodrama performances and perceive of bloggers as heroes and heroines of melodramatic stories they write and perform.

Drawing on Brooks's (1985) argument supporting the importance of melodrama in the creation of modern sensibility, in her study of the politics of television in Egypt, Lila Abu-Lughod (2005) shows how the centrality of emotionality in Egyptian melodramatic television serials helped create selves by guiding viewers to bring their interiority to the fore.⁷⁰ These melodramatic television stories, and melodrama in general which is characterized by its "excess and overstatement" (Brooks, 1985, p. ix), place

⁷⁰ Gutman (1988, pp. 100-101) similarly sees a correspondence between "a genuinely new conception of the self" and "the valorization of emotive life" in Rousseau's *Confessions*.

“strong emotion in the everyday interpersonal world” (L. Abu-Lughod, 2005, p. 116). By doing this, they change people’s sense of self. Abu-Lughod also, more importantly to my argument, states that not so much the content of the melodramatic serials but the genre itself that places emotions at the center is responsible for the creation of *modern* Egyptian selves fashioned by watching the programs. As such, she writes, “television melodrama in Egypt might be understood most directly as a technology for the production of new kinds of selves. It is a technology [...] for staging interiorities (through heightened emotionalism) and thus constructing and encouraging the individuality of ordinary people” (p. 113).

Greenblatt’s (2005) now-classic investigation into renaissance self-fashioning looks at the interplay between the symbolic structure of certain literary texts and the career of their authors to understand the co-creation of literary and social identities. Abu-Lughod’s study goes further than this as her research is not limited to a look *through* television melodrama to learn about Egyptians; she instead looks *at* the genre and its nature and qualities to study its effect in “melodramatizing the consciousness” (Williams, 1989 as cited in L. Abu-Lughod, 2005), and its contribution to the creation of *modern* Egyptian selves. Abu-Lughod argues that emotionality in melodrama provides viewers with “an education in sentiment” (p. 118), by which she means this genre of television production creates characters who, in spite of not being heroes of epic stories, are inspired to have a rich inner life and enjoy an intense individuality.

In my fieldwork research in the Persian blogosphere, I observed an effect on subjectivity and selfhood approximating that of Egyptian melodrama. The telling of one’s story in a melodramatic fashion in the Persian blogosphere provides one with a unique

position from which to justify his or her experience. This position, the vantage point from which to look at one's life, enables a certain self—a self who enjoys an intense individuality and whose rich inner life is always relevant and important. While the effect of blogging, like that of melodrama, is not necessarily dependent on the content, its outcome may be attributed to not so much the “nature of the genre” (L. Abu-Lughod, 2005, p. 112), but rather (or more specifically) to its *place*. In other words, what encourages a melodramatic account of the self is the *place* of the blog. The place of blog, as we shall see, is the *between* (most importantly, in-between public and private). While in melodrama heightened emotionality, intrinsic to the genre, educates the viewers' sentiments, the in-between place of blogging encourages a narrative in which the blogger as an individual is important. When seen in the context of the prevalent meaning of public and private in Iran, blogging as an in-between form of writing is a fertile ground for the intense individuality and heightened emotionalism that the likes of the blogposts we saw in this chapter share with melodrama. The place of blogging, in-between public and private, allows and encourages public narratives of lived experience whose focus are on an autonomous self. Not only do the individual and his or her emotions and interiority become relevant in the Persian blogosphere, but also they become central to the understanding of the world around him or her.

A detour to an episode in the early days of the history of blogging in Iran might provide some context for this claim. In September 2001, Hossein Derakhshan (also

known by his blogging moniker, Hoder) started one of the very first Iranian blogs.⁷¹ Known in the community of bloggers and beyond as the Father of Persian Blogging (Heller, 2005), Derakhshan is usually credited with “inspiring thousands of Iranians to start their own blogs” not only by presenting an early example of a personal blog written in Persian, but also by publishing a step-by-step technical guide for Iranian Internet users, so they could create Persian blogs using the Unicode standard (Perrone, 2003). Derakhshan, who later received a 17-year prison sentence partly owing to his blogposts and served six years before he was pardoned, named his blog *sardabār: xodam* (Editor: Myself). While the “editor” part of the title echoed his journalism background and drew attentions to possibilities of blogging for journalism, important to my argument is his blog’s “myself” half of the title that was a harbinger of a self or subjectivity in the Persian blogosphere that is independent, autonomous, and perfectly capable of self-sufficiently expressing his or her own true interiority.⁷² Xodam, myself, in Persian may denote someone’s super-independence which indicates the negative notion of taking too much pride in one’s self (e.g., in *xodam xodam kardan*) that is, from a personality point of view, a sign of arrogance or immaturity and, from a societal point of view, an indication of irreverence toward the hierarchically organized society. I argue that this new autonomous subjectivity and the self it organized, in the case of bloggers with whom

⁷¹ As mentioned in the previous chapter, most likely Derakhshan’s blog was the second Persian blog after that of Salman Jariri created on September 7, 2001 [Shahrivar 16, 1380], which has been unofficially declared and celebrated as the Persian Blogosphere Day (*rūz-e veblāgestān-e fārsī*).

⁷² The parallel of this self in the political debates that were going on around the same time, is a citizen who is fully knowledgeable of his or her interiority, wants, and the world around his or her. As such this political self can decide about his or her own future. This citizen is not therefore part of the *ommat* (that is led by an *emām* who knows about the needs of his people better than they do); he or she is rather part of the *mellat* (nation), does not need a *qayyem* (guardian), and should simply be represented by an elected representative who simply re-present (and not replace) him or her.

I worked, owe their emergence to blogging as an in-between form of writing where ordinary Iranians found themselves in a place where they were not only allowed but encouraged to publicly *stage* their *interiority* while defying the negative implications of such an understanding of the self and replacing it with an independent and important one.

The in-between place of the technology of blogging, most importantly as in-between public and private, plays a significant role in the constitution of these new subjectivities. As I discussed in the previous chapter, a significant categorical distinction in cultural perception of place in Iran, the public versus private dichotomy in its many manifestations informs Iranians' behavior in their daily actions and interactions. The emergence of blogging in Iran upset this dichotomy and kindled many debates (including moral panics, as we shall see) over blogs' status in relation to this dichotomy and whether the contents of blogs are appropriate for public. Absent from these debates however was the notion of a culturally available third, in-between place that blogging not only reintroduced and popularized but also to which gave precedence over both public and private. In terms of spatial divisions, the in-between public and private may be more significant than each of the two sides of the dichotomy as it accounts for "the dynamic, action-created reality" (Friedl, 1991) of everyday life. Already a culturally available but less acknowledged category, this central in-between third place, as we shall see, enjoys the exceptional status of being *both* public *and* associated with intense individuality and the richness of inner selves, appropriate for the private. This in-between category can manifest itself as a culturally sanctioned place where the individual's interiority and one's autonomous self can uncharacteristically be publicly staged in a non-formulaic fashion. Tapping into the possibilities of this third place, blogging in Iran provided a space where

people were urged to publicly bring to the fore their interiority and feelings—things that in their traditional non-formulaic, non-ritualistic forms used to belong to the private spaces and the interior of homes.⁷³ The in-between place of blogging encouraged people to stage their emotions and rich inner lives and paved the way for independent, autonomous, subjects.

3-4- A SELF UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT ON AN IN-BETWEEN STAGE

As discussed in the second chapter, the most distinctive feature of the medium of blogging that distinguishes it from other modes of writing usually likened to it (e.g., public journalistic writing and private personal diary keeping) is its strong in-betweenness manifested in several dimensions. Most outstandingly, blogging offers a mode of in-between writing marked by being neither fully public nor completely private. Afsoon in her blog wrote about some very private experiences, including her sexual relations and even her sexual orgasms, that culturally must not be shared with others. Likewise, Iman blogged about not only his good deeds, but also mistakes and personal sins, including, among other things, missing sunrise prayers, which in many cases are meant to remain undisclosed as they are only appropriate to be confessed and atoned to god (because no one else's rights are violated, they are considered to be God's rights, *haq-o-llāh*). Although in many cases written in the form of a 'note to self', Iman's blogposts were available to everyone with an Internet connection. In other words,

⁷³ Abu-Lughod (2005, p. 123), in reference to the question of place, draws a comparison between the centrality of individuality and "presence of interior worlds and domestic spaces" in television melodrama.

although Iranian bloggers expressed their most private experiences in their blogs (Alexanian, 2006), blogs were, unlike diaries, widely read by strangers. Nevertheless, they were not considered fully public as a distinctive aspect of the public sphere in Iran is that it requires, among other things, a formal language that blogs lack. The traditional public media (radio, television, and print media) that are meant for the public sphere use the type of language appropriate for the public.

Also, as I mentioned in the second chapter the in-between place to which blogs belong is a culturally known category. The verandah in traditional Iranian architecture, the rooftop (*pošt-e bām*) of houses in Tehran under the 1978 curfew,⁷⁴ and the semi-private space pertained to zones outside houses that use a common accessway in neighborhoods are other culturally recognized in-between places. Historical and cultural evidence attests to the availability of a third, in-between category and its significance which at times takes precedence over the more acknowledged categories of public and private. However, in the accounts of these and similar traditional in-between places, they appear to be passive spaces that due to their ambiguity can be creatively used by social players to accomplish things otherwise unattainable. Social players in other words take advantage of the ambiguity of the space to express their inner selves publicly. In my field

⁷⁴ Rooftops served a similar function during the political unrest generally known as the Green Movement of 2009. An interlocutor, in a discussion not directly related to the topic of blogging, alluded to a change in his political identity when he said that prior the rooftop protests in which he took part every night during the movement in 2009, in spite of not supporting the leader-endorsed elected President, he respected the leader and thought of him as someone who strategized beyond the conflicts and rivalries of the engaged political parties. He said although he had seen the leader's biased judgments in different political conflicts in the past, his image as a divine leader immune to criticism only broke when he joined others in shouting slogans that directly addressed the leader. In other words, when as he was following others on rooftops, he repeated the words that were not supposed to be publicly expressed, in a space that not only allowing but also encouraging the public expression of such ideas, his political identity changed from a critic to a dissenter.

research, I observed that blogging similarly reintroduced a comparable in-between place and with it came all its potentiality for fashioning selves. However, in my observations, it seemed that blogs, beyond being a passive place strategically used by bloggers, actively encouraged the interiority of the bloggers and their public persona to commingle. This active view of place favoring certain performances is in line with Edward Casey's (2004) understanding of in-between spaces capable of engendering certain qualities. For example, he (Casey, 2004, p. 244) writes of doorways, ranging from the "Gate of All Nations" at Persepolis to the front doors of ordinary houses, as places that "encourage us to pause and ponder, since they are at once beginning- and end-points of human habitation." Blogs are not merely passive stages that can be actively used—in many cases for resisting and defying—for a public yet private performance. They moreover may actively call upon bloggers and encourage such performances due to their in-betweenness (cf. the role that the ambience plays not only in creating the condition for, but also encouraging, gambling in: Schüll, 2012).

The quality of blogs as in-between places turns them into 'personalized public' stages. Like other stage performers, even if they are engaged in a solitary discourse, bloggers have an audience which in some cases is extremely large. In spite of the presence of the audience, the stage is nevertheless very personal as the lights on the stage, according to an interlocutor, are all focused on the blogger (*motemarkeze rüye man*) who is forced (*majbûre*) to write about his or her own experiences and feelings as soon as he or she steps on the stage. Just before using the metaphor of a stage to describe the practice of blogging, the same interlocutor, a bona fide raconteur, in a group email

conversation and in reaction to other functions of blogs—including commercial, advertising, and news-spreading uses—remarked,

I can't understand what's the point of using a blog to spread the news that has already been published in news outlets. How can one even do that? If the posts are not about the blogger, it's not a blog. When I log into my blog, I feel I must write something about my own experiences, something about my own life. Even if I think there is a piece of news that's important and I feel others also should know about it, I can't help but writing about my own personal take [on that news; not the news itself] (*nemītūnam jelo-ye xodam ro begīram ke bardāšt-e šaxsī-ye xodam ro nanevīsam*). Whenever I type in the editor box of my blog's interface, I feel that it's a dark stage with a single stool at the center and the lights are all focused on me. [In my blog] I must say something about myself. Everyone [in the audience] is waiting for me to say something about myself. Otherwise, what's the point? It's like when you're sitting in front of a police officer in an investigation room and they have adjusted the light on your face. Under the light, you feel you must confess something about your own activities. It would be funny if the lights are on you and you talk about the weather forecast [something general, not personal.] You confess your secrets, as awful as they are, and you don't care there are people behind [the one-way mirror] listening to you. You have no other options (*čāre-ye dīge-ī nadārī*).

Another informant, in the same group conversation, used the metaphor of a house made of glass (*xūne-ye šīše-ī*) that gives the resident the feeling of a comfortable place where he or she can take care of his or her private needs with no shame while knowing he or she is being watched.

Whether forced or encouraged, whether it is a voluntary “solo performance” (Berns, 2010, p. 14) on a stage or involuntary confession in an interrogation room, the in-between place of blogging calls upon bloggers to bring their interiority (*bāten*) to the forefront in a public setting. In other words, blog as an in-between place, is not a stage *waiting* for the blogger to fill it with words and lived experiences. It invites, expects⁷⁵, and even forces the bloggers to express his or her interiority and helps transform and

⁷⁵ Also see the discussion of blogs as expectant systems in chapter 4.

create those lived experiences in the process. To do so, in the context of Iranian culture, it may draw on culturally available perceptions of place. For instance, although bloggers know their posts can be read by strangers, to talk about their blogs they choose metaphors that signal privacy and signify being in the sanctuary of a private place. Related to the metaphor of a glass-made house, a popular perception of blogs among Iranian bloggers indicating privacy is “*čehār dīvārī-ye extīyārī*” which loosely translates to a ‘four-walled’ and therefore private place (*čehār dīvārī*) over which one has control (*extīyār*). A quick Google search of the phrase retrieves several Persian blogs titled ‘*čehār dīvārī-ye extīyārī*’ on the first page of the results alone. Add to this many blogs whose titles contain words like *xāne* (home), *otāq* (room), *xalvat* (solitude), and *gūše* (corner). Similarly, the culturally familiar in-between spaces, the cultural significance of ‘third space,’ and expansion of the physical borders of the inside guide us to understand why Iranian bloggers more often than not title the blogroll (links to other blogs) section of their blogs “*hamsāyehā*” (neighbors)⁷⁶ and call the Persian blogosphere “*veblāgestān*” that gives the impression of being in a semi-private, friendly community where you can share with others your *xodemūnī* (intimate) and *bī-ta’ārof* (unfiltered) thoughts and emotions.

The in-betweenness of blogging also manifests itself in that blogging can be both anonymous and personal. Bloggers can remain anonymous but still remain particular as anonymity and facelessness are not synonymous in the blogosphere. Bloggers can decide not to reveal their identities but still paint a very detailed picture of themselves by

⁷⁶ Likening fellow bloggers to neighbors, one interlocutor justified her blogging about *private* experiences by drawing upon the half-joking, half-serious saying that one’s neighbor is a *mahram* (put very simply, a relative in front of whom women do not need to cover themselves).

exposing their interiority (*bāten*), desires, and emotions. In fact, in many cases they are able to expose their *bāten* because they can remain impersonal. They can be, in other words, the anonymous heroes and heroines of their own stories. Not only does the facelessness of the heroes and heroines not compromise the significance of their inner selves, but also it augments it. In the same group conversation that I mentioned above, another informant, wrote “everyone is a god in his or her own blog (*har kasī tū veblāg-e xodeš xodāst*), just like everyone is the best singer in the bathroom!⁷⁷” These gods, unlike bathroom singers, are not however restrained to the walls of their private spaces and their emotions and feelings are not simply a matter of private reflection. The centrality of the interiority of bloggers, turn them into gods, the autonomous and independent subjects, as they perform on public stage. The emergence of such subjectivities has political consequences and implications—just like the consequences of the performance of the widow on the verandah, as described in chapter 2, for relations of power in which she was engaged.

The implications of the emergence of this new type of subjectivity for the relations of power was hinted at in the same group conversation from which I took the two last-quoted passages. I will describe the point about the political implications of blogging in the next section. However, instead of moving on directly to this certain point, I first describe some other aspects of the conversation that pertain to the points already discussed. I do so both to contextualize the argument about power and also to draw

⁷⁷ Although said as a joke, this analogy is telling because the bathroom and its acoustic environment may in fact *encourage* singing just the way blog and its in-between place might encourage an intense individuality. Attributing agency to nonhumans, Ibn-Khaldun (1958, p. 63) in a prefatory section on the influence of climate on human behavior writes that in the bathroom “the spirit expands” as the hot air enters the spirits of bathers. It often then “happens that they start singing, as singing has its origin in gladness.”

attention to other points made by the participants in the conversation (who all became my key informants) that are related to the discussion of blogging as an in-between technology of writing.

3-5- THE NATURE OF BLOGGING

“I do not completely agree. I’m not always *me* when I write [in my blog] (*sad dar sad movāfeq nīstam. vaqtī mīnevīsam hamīše xodam nīstam*),” wrote Nooshin in a group email thread that I had started in September 2013. She wrote this in response to Sia, another blogger on the thread, who had written before Nooshin that blogging is not automatic-writing. Sia had rejected the idea of blogging as automatic-writing to show the former is not an inconsequential, thought-free process as it is sometimes portrayed by the more established writers and intellectuals. To explain her response, Nooshin added that “sometimes it is almost as if someone writes on behalf of me (*taqrīban mesl-e īne ke yekī az tarāfe man mīnevīse*). My fingers are typing, but too fast for my mind to catch them up.”

I had started this email thread at the suggestion of Sia, a very witty research interlocutor, to understand what blogging means to bloggers. Before this group email, Sia and I had an individual conversation in July 2013 about the nature of blogging in which he reminded me that this topic had been already discussed in the Persian blogosphere a couple of times. The history of the discussion in fact went years back to the thriving days of blogging in Iran. In spring 2006, for one, some bloggers, including Sia himself, engaged in a few online conversations and a sort of meta writing about blogging by

writing in their blogs and leaving comments on their interlocutors' blogposts. In 2006, the Persian blogosphere was a much more active community. A majority of bloggers had not yet moved their lively discussions to Facebook, Google Reader (a very popular feed aggregator among Iranian users who had a nickname for it, *gooder*, before the service was retired in 2013 when Google eventually grouped all its social media services in Google Plus), Friendfeed (a real-time feed aggregator, popular among Iranians who liked its conversation-friendly environment before it was shut down by its new owner, Facebook), Twitter, cross-platform messaging applications, and the like.

In that individual conversation with Sia, he suggested that “in memory of (*be yāde*),” the blogosphere's lost, energetic atmosphere, it is nice if I invite bloggers to engage in one of those discussions. “People no longer discuss (*bahs nemīkonan*). All they do is trolling,” he regretfully remarked. In the next couple of weeks, I talked with eight bloggers (some for the first time), half of which agreed to discuss their viewpoints in an email thread.

Later in the same email thread, Shadi, another blogger wrote that for her the blogosphere is like the fitting space of a women's clothing store in Tehran. She wrote that the most fascinating thing about this store “is not the merchandise or prices or the staff; it is the intimate semi-private, semi-public (*nīme xosūsī, nīme omūmī*) fitting place” where “one never gets bored spending time.” Shadi described the fitting room (or the locker room) as an active location where women, in partial stages of undress, talk about every imaginable topic “from cooking recipes to relationship advice to politics, economy, and business.” Additionally, they comment on other people's clothes while trying on the items they have selected or items others have brought and think might look better on their

fellow shoppers. Shadi remarked “you almost feel you’re at your own home (*taqrīban ehsās mīkonī to xūne-ye xodetī*), but are suddenly find yourself naked in front of strangers. It is very confusing if it is your first time [shopping there].”

Ambiguity and uncertainty, a characteristic of in-betweenness, in one form or another, appeared in my interlocutors’ description of blogging. Reminding of what Boellstorff (2008, p. 18) describes in terms of virtual as ‘almost’, ambiguity and uncertainty also manifested itself in my interlocutors’ definition of blogging as something that cannot be fully defined. Although I never asked it directly during the group conversation, I think if there was one thing all participants in the thread would agree upon, it was that they could not tell what *exactly* blogging is. All they shared was in fact what blogging is not. It is *almost* like one’s home; it is *almost* automatic-writing; it is *almost* a serious daily task; it is *almost* a public activity; it is *almost* life; it is *almost* therapy; it is *almost* diary-keeping. In other words, in the email thread, my interlocutors’ understanding of blogging approached other things “without arriving there” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 19).

In addition to being a quality of the in-between, ambiguity is also an indication of crisis. Afsoon, with whom I first had a conversation on the same thread, disagreed with Shadi and wrote: “Maybe this chaotic picture (*tasvīr-e por az harj o marj*) defines the blogosphere as a whole, but my blog is the opposite of this. I take refuge to my blog, when I feel almost nothing in the world makes sense (*vqī ehsās mīkonam taqrīban hīcī tu jahān ma’nā nadāre*). I feel safe in my blog.” Dealing with the consequences of the romantic love I described in previous sections which affected her life tremendously but about which she could not talk with those around her, Afsoon used her blog to make

sense of the world. In fact, immediately reminding me of Mircea Eliade's (1959, p. 36) account of axis mundi, the "center of the world" (*markaz-e jahān*) was the phrase she used to describe her blog.

Before our group conversation naturally depreciated over the next two months and ultimately died out, the email thread included many valuable discussions about blogging and its nature. Common to all of the discussions was a notion of ambiguity, both as a characteristic of the in-between and also as the feeling of indecision accompanying a disturbed world in crisis at a turning point. Words associated with ambiguity, imperfection, and confusion were greatly used when my interlocutors were describing the nature and function of blogging. Also, as I have already mentioned, it seems that by allowing and encouraging the expression of one's interiority in a heroic fashion, the in-between place of blogging contributes to one's sense of a relatively stable, autonomous self. The irony therefore is that an ambiguous, in-between place fashions a subject seeking clarification for his or her uncertain situation. In other words, ironically, the blogger's confusion and the ambiguity innate to blogging, despite what it may look, result in security and power. Confusion and decision, a feeling of ambiguity and a sense of security do not necessarily describe opposites in the Persian blogosphere.⁷⁸ Blogging as a technology of the self then may make bloggers, as one informant mentioned, gods in

⁷⁸ Ambiguity and confusion undergirding clarity and the power that comes with it is a characteristic of the process of issuing religious rulings too. Agrama (2010, p. 12) points out that "perplexity of the fatwa seeker about what to do, and the uncertainty of the mufti about what to say about what to do" create an extremely powerful text, i.e., *fatwa*. Can we say that it is as if indecisive bloggers in search for clarity, instead of going to experts, look to another uncertain reference, (i.e., their blogs) and issue personal *fatwas* for themselves so they can proceed with power and control?

their own blogs as they feel at times in control of the world around them. The confidence that bloggers feel may then explain the consequences of blogging for relations of power.

The relations of power in the Persian blogosphere were pointed out in the same group conversation, especially when Shadi elaborated on her comparison between blogosphere and the semi-private, semi-public fitting room she described to visualize bloggers' activities in the Persian blogosphere. When I asked her to tell the group more about the resemblance between the Persian blogosphere and that fitting space, Shadi replied "in there like in the blogosphere everyone is like everyone else," and "everyone helps everyone else by giving advice and sharing experiences." "But there sometimes are," she right away added "buzzkillers [*zedd-e hāl*] who think they know more than everybody else and do nothing but criticize other people's taste of clothing and ridicule other people's stories. They even go as far as criticizing recipes—Just like in the blogosphere." She jokingly asked "Why are these people incapable of enjoying a random assembly of people? Why do they insist on being the 'Mrs. Teachers'? Sometimes I want to tap them on the back in the middle of their lecture and tell them: 'Ma'am! You're as naked as I am. Get off [your car] and let's walk together' (*pīyāde šo bā ham berīm*)!"

Many of the buzzkillers (policers) of the Persian blogosphere to whom Shadi referred, following Gramsci (1971), are traditional intellectuals who consider themselves to be independent from the dominant social group, yet reproduce existing social hierarchies. They have the symbolic power to produce knowledge as they do the most recognizable types of intellectual work. Their off-line occupations include journalism, literary criticism, teaching philosophy, and writing novels. The traditional intellectuals

who mostly blog under their real names police the discourse of the lay bloggers in variety of ways.

3-6- BUZZKILLERS

Shadi's emphasis on the "buzzkillers" (policers) in the Persian blogosphere who delegitimized other bloggers' accounts revealed an ironic tension: the democratization for which the Persian blogosphere was vastly praised simultaneously took place alongside attempts to silence others—a greatly neglected attempt that was a far cry from the more-talked-about government's censorship of the blogosphere and prosecution of bloggers. In fact, some of the traditional intellectuals policing others were themselves victims of the government's censorship.

This irony is an outcome of a change in the relations of power in the Persian blogosphere related to the emergence of new subjectivities already discussed. On the one hand the ordinary bloggers developed autonomous, independent selves, who do not need others to decide for them. On the other hand, to maintain contact with their audience who had found the Internet to be an inexpensive resource of diverse content and also to publish their work outside of the governmental monitoring and censorship system, Iranian traditional intellectuals stepped into the Persian blogosphere very early after its advent. However, they did this at the cost of their authority. Blogging dragged them from their exalted status to "a nasty place"—a place that as Doostdar (2004) demonstrates was condemned by some of the same intellectuals for its vulgarity, unoriginality, and unrefined thoughts communicated in an oft-denigrated discourse. In exchange for their

freedom of speech and with the hope of enjoying ongoing popularity, traditional intellectuals lost their authority as they became more accessible in the Persian blogosphere where the encounter between a philosopher and a lay person was not at all unusual.

In spite of official censorship, Iranian traditional intellectuals used to enjoy a relatively exclusive right to the production of meaning for (at least) the urban educated public either through official channels or by using “small media” (Sreberny & Mohammadi, 1994). However, thanks to blogging, far larger populations of the society became visible and were able to break “the monopoly on ‘truth’” (Gamson, 1998, p. 104) as expression of alternative interpretations and articulation of different frameworks became possible. The Iranian traditional intellectuals tried to shore up their authority by, among other things, policing the lay bloggers’ use of language, criticizing its flaws, and constructing it as a public problem. While many bloggers with whom I talked maintained that the lack of perfection, the messiness, incompleteness, and abundance of misspelling worked for them to create connections with their readers (cf. Piepmeier, 2009, pp. 115-116), traditional intellectuals defined lay bloggers’ use of language as defective and warned against its moral ramifications; because for them the faulty language of lay bloggers was no longer merely about linguistic errors. It moreover indicated a “poverty of values” (Meyers, 2004, p. 198) that included a range of moral issues—most significantly, disrespect toward social structure, national identity, and traditions.

Reza Shokrollahi’s writings were probably the most illustrative representation of traditional intellectuals’ view of language. Shokrollahi, a literary critic and journalist who also wrote his own blog, in an interview with an Iranian news agency stated: “There are

some basic principles for writing in the Web, for instance the correct punctuation system [...]. These principles must be followed. The more earnest and determined bloggers will abide by these standards. Those who do not follow these principles are slovenly (*šelaxte*) and careless.”⁷⁹ For Shokrollahi, language represented “a national resource that smug, careless young bloggers do not care about.”⁸⁰ Although through blogging about language use in the Persian blogosphere and publishing online instructions and interviews Shokrollahi promoted “correct” Persian which according to another advocate was “sweet, beautiful and euphonious,”⁸¹ the concerns of prescriptivists like Shokrollahi were not merely confined to grammar and punctuation. They moreover criticized the immorality and loss of values that the “flawed” use of language represents.

The power to define a social issue as a public problem involving moral judgments is not distributed equally as some have access to larger amounts of material and non-material resources to shape the definition of public issues (Gusfield, 1981, p. 8). Although the unequal distribution of power played a role in the definition of linguistic flaws as a public problem in the Persian blogosphere, power did not completely rest with intellectuals, for the nature of blogging changed the relations of power in favor of lay people. This in return diminished the traditional intellectuals’ ability to convert the issue of grammatical correctness into a larger public problem. Blogging as a medium helped achieve this by diminishing the differences between readers and writers. This however was not the first time that readers became writers and as a result gained some symbolic

⁷⁹ <http://goo.gl/H5Lemt>

⁸⁰ <http://goo.gl/SH0Tqs>

⁸¹ <http://goo.gl/nt1ww2>

power. In *The Author as Producer*, Walter Benjamin (1983) notes that like other productions, works of art rely on productive forces and social relations between the producer and audience of the work. As a result, for him, revolution in art does not simply equate to transformation of the message. But it involves an alteration of the medium. For Benjamin, the revolutionary artist alters artistic forms (i.e., productive forces) so new relations between the artist and the audience emerge. Benjamin demonstrates that newspapers throwing “open new columns for readers’ questions, opinions, and protests” raise readers to “the rank of correspondents” (Benjamin, 1983, p. 90). Indifferent to being “technically perfect” (Benjamin, 1983, p. 95), the melting-down process that Benjamin writes about surmounts the differences between reader and writer. Similarly, blogs radically blurred the rigid boundaries between authors and readers as bloggers were at the same time writers, readers, connoisseurs, and critics. Nevertheless, the traditional intellectuals who had historically been main users of alternative media also employed the same technology of blogging as did lay bloggers, in their attempts to reassert their linguistic and intellectual authority.

The line between writer and reader was not the only boundary becoming flimsy and blurred. As I mentioned, blogging as a genre of writing also blurred the boundary between public and private. Blogging is in-between in the sense that it is neither fully public nor completely private— like the fitting space in Shadi’s account. For many bloggers with whom I talked, this in-between technology of writing calls for a mixed register, neither formal nor colloquial, whose use contradicts the traditional intellectuals’ favor for orderliness which requires the separation of the two. It may explain why a key theme in Shokrollahi’s writings was criticism of disorderliness in blogging. In a blog-

based conversation with another blogger, Shokrollahi stated that even if one wants to write in the colloquial register, one should still consistently stick to the rules. Condemning slovenliness of bloggers, he emphasized the value of consistency when it comes to the colloquial orthography:

[If I have to choose,] I prefer the language and writing of those who consistently write incorrectly and in the same messy way over the language that is vagrant and wishy-washy. A simple example of this manner in orthography is the case of [the verb] “mīše” [to become in its colloquial form]. It is way better if someone always writes the word in its wrong form “mī še” (می شه) with space [between the first and the second components “mī” and “še”] instead of semi-space [which is a character with almost no use in English]; in fact, it is way better than someone who writes the same word, in her/his blog and even in the same line, in three different shapes: “mī še” [with space] (می شه), “mīše” (می شه) [with semi-space] and “mīše” [without space] (می شه)⁸².

In another blogpost, Shokrollahi also linked disorderliness in writing to “under literacy and mental sluggishness.”⁸³ For Shokrollahi and other prescriptivists, the ideal language was consistent and uniform. That uniformity is a value of great importance to this language ideology can be observed in the corrigenda Shokrollahi published on his blog using other bloggers’ common errors as examples as well as in the webinars on language and media Payam Yazdanjoo, another traditional intellectual, held for Facebook users during my fieldwork. Shokrollahi’s undoubtedly prescriptivist blogposts which for instance included a uniform standard for the accusative marker’s place in the sentence⁸⁴ implied that language must be used in a uniform manner. The will to police language in order to universalize it was discernible in instructions that, regardless of the context, provided writers with certain undeniable scientific principles. In another part of the

⁸² <http://goo.gl/okzh64>

⁸³ <http://goo.gl/ka56Oy>

⁸⁴ <http://goo.gl/bKUQmQ>

aforementioned interview, Shokrollahi stated that what he promotes is ubiquitously true, regardless of the topic and the register. Moreover, since it seems to be established that the rules are universal and thus standardized (or as a guest writer in Shokrollahi's blog put it "scientific"⁸⁵), they worked as fine assessment tools to measure individuals' morality to distinguish the "earnest and determined" from the "slovenly." As such, the desired hierarchical social structure in which the traditional intellectuals maintained their power as well as the preferred values (order, consistency and obedience to rules and authorities) were reflected in the linguistic prescriptions.

The story of how lay bloggers use the technology of blogging to their advantage in order to voice their accounts and resist the government has been told over and over. However, this repetitive success story usually tends to romanticize the resistance and fails to take into account the attempts by the challenged authorities who utilize the very technology of blogging to recover their lost monopoly of the production of meaning. In other words, the success story of blogging facilitating democratization (whether it is old-fashioned blogs or more popular forms of micro-blogging) reduces the many struggles of power going on at different levels to a struggle between the oppressing government and voice-seeking bloggers. The struggle over authority in the Persian blogosphere and other social media of the Internet is an example of how attempts at silencing others by social groups not affiliated with the government are a co-product of attempts for the freedom of speech.

⁸⁵ <http://goo.gl/hpTl1x>

3-7- CONCLUSION

Ranging from spatial metaphors describing blogs (or the blogosphere itself) to spatial deixis used to hyper-link other blogs, there is ample evidence that bloggers first and foremost understand their blogs as places. This simple yet significant feature is however neglected in existing studies of the Persian blogosphere. In the prevalent culture of Iran, place is usually understood in terms of the cultural categories of outside/public (associated with exterior manifestations or *zāher*) and inside/private (linked to one's interiority and inner self or *bāten*). Neither public nor private, blogs are however usually associated with a third place of in-between. Actual places between public and private are not unprecedented in cultural perception of space in Iran. Nonetheless, these places are generally understood as passive spaces that due to their ambiguous status can be used by active social players to defy the restrict rules imposed by the public vs. private dichotomy. In contrast to this passive portrayal of in-between places, my ethnographic evidence supports an image of blogs in which they are places that due to their in-between status actively call upon bloggers to bring to the fore their interiorities (*bāten*) in a public setting. These places urge individuals to stand as heroes and heroines at the center of narratives best described as melodramatic performances. As discursive strategies helping bloggers articulate their lives, these narratives provide individual bloggers with external vantage points from which to look into their interiority.

These narratives share many features with melodrama and are characterized by their high emotionalism and focus on rich inner selves of their heroes or heroines. The in-between place of blogging by means of engaging bloggers in melodramatic narratives

make certain subjectivities available which in turn organize particular selves that are always relevant in the world around them, play important roles in their own lives, and are autonomous (in the sense the word *xodam* conveys). Since the self that is organized in this way is autonomous (or has the illusion of control), blogging has implications for the relations of power characterized by the dominance of a group of intellectuals who find their traditional exclusive rights to produce meaning at risk. As a result, those who perceive their power and control in jeopardy use the same technology of writing to silence others. The silencing of others in a place vastly acknowledged for its giving voice to seemingly voiceless people is not blogging's only apparent paradox. The Persian blogosphere also can be conceived of as a sphere where confusion undergirds clarity; where "original" selves are affected by the properties of a technology; and where "autonomous" selves are fashioned by succumbing to the structure of a prescribed genre.

Chapters 4 and 5 address, respectively, the question of autonomy and originality. Here, nevertheless, I want to once more reconsider the question of the in-between to address one last ethnographic insight: why do bloggers believe that their blogs are *and* are not them? In-betweenness indicates a gap. It is, among other things, a *gap* between (or an *overlap* of) inside and outside, private and public, and the event and its meaning. As we saw, the distance this *gap* creates (or if we are thinking in topological terms of an *overlap*, the height it creates) makes available a vantage point for bloggers to look at themselves. This gap however can also be understood as a space between the narrated I and the narrating I where a dialogical engagement between the two becomes possible (Crapanzano, 1996, p. 109). Following Merleau-Ponty (2002, pp. 152-153) whose philosophy also speaks to the question of gap (*écart*), this dialogue directs the subject to

draw together the meaning diffused through the words on the display describing in one way or another the narrated I. The result of this dialogue is a world that speaks to the subject of him- or herself. It is important to note that the gap that makes the dialogue possible can never be overcome. According to Merleau-Ponty,⁸⁶ it is because the same dialogue changes the subject's perception of things. Things put in a new horizon calls upon the subject to continue the dialogue by soliciting and bringing together his or her intentions. This means that, if bloggers are heroes and heroines of the melodramatic narratives that appear in their blogposts, the distance between the blogger and the hero or heroine of the blog never vanishes. It is why bloggers with whom I worked in one way or another pointed out that their blogs are and are not them. This was true even in the case of blogs that shared their names with their bloggers. Crapanzano describes this never-vanishing distance between the hero or heroine and the narrator in terms of "the failure of self-narrative possibility" or the impossibility of "the full emergence of the self as at once narrated and narrating"⁸⁷ (1996, p. 118; cf. Dennett, 1991, p. 114 for whom "the chief fictional character at the center of [...] autobiography is one's self"). In other words, although the dialogue gives meaning and makes a path for the becoming of both the narrated I on the computer display and the narrating I on the keyboard, it always retains some extent of ambiguity necessary for the creativity of the individual and that of the world (cf. Pandian, 2015, p. 8). In the next two chapters, we shall see examples of how an interaction between the blogger and his or her blogposts (chapter 5) and the blogger and

⁸⁶ This is at least true about the early Merleau-Ponty of *Phenomenology of Perception*. He revised some of his ideas on the priority of perception in his posthumously-published book *The Visible and the Invisible*.

⁸⁷ Merleau-Ponty (1968) perceives this in terms of dehiscence because of which flesh (that improves on how he in his previous works characterized the relationship between the consciousness and what the consciousness is about) cannot see itself seeing.

the technology of blogging itself (chapter 4) results in surprises associated with this creative ambiguity. If we are still following Merleau-Ponty, this creative ambiguity (that bloggers are *almost* their blogs; that they are and are not their blogs), is linked to the notion of dehiscence through which things can be the same while remaining profoundly different. The in-between place of blogging amplifies both the identity and alterity of the blogger and his or her blogposts. In spite of their similarities, the blogger is not a mirror image of the subject-positions within the narratives produced in the blog. The subjectivity of the blogger is located in the between place where the blogger and his or her words intertwine.

دم که مَرِدِ نایِی اندر نای کرد
در خور نای است؛ نه در خورد مرد

- مولانا

*The breath that the flute-player blows into the reed-flute
is the quality of the flute and does not correspond to that of the player.*
- Rumi

4

Chapter 4: Lines, Folds, Gaps

4-1- INTRODUCTION

A MEANS REPLACING, STRAIGHTENING, OR facilitating the work of human organs (Gehlen, 2003, p. 213) without encroaching on human competencies, technology is usually understood to be “a neutral carrier of will” (Latour, 1999, p. 177), efficiently controlled by human users to achieve a pre-planned goal typically involving appropriation of the material world that is deemed to be more difficult to attain in the absence of the said technology. This *tabula rasa* interpretation of technology—that, given the purpose and effectiveness of the tool, the outcome of its use only reflects the

user's desires and plans—is indicative of a hegemonic understanding of humankind that shows partiality toward human-the-user as the sole and autonomous cause of not only changing the material world, but also transforming her- or himself.

Moreover, newer technologies appear to improve and ideally obliterate previous, older technologies or strip their functionality away and turn them into pure aesthetical objects (M. Taussig, 2012, p. 94). This function-oriented view that conceives of technology as a benign vessel, or following Heidegger (1977, p. 5) an *instrumentum*—in which on one hand the intentional subject and the programmed object and on the other hand the technology's functionality and its aesthetics are clearly differentiated—lingers in our perception partly due to a deficit in social studies of technology in its material, particular forms which in turn is an indication of a historical *horror materiae* (Verbeek, 2005, p. 1)—a historical fear of material, transient technologies capable of changing eternal, natural human qualities, or to put it differently, a fear of giving precedence to the so-called secondary qualities threatening the universality and homogeneity of both the object and the subject. In spite of recent sociological, philosophical, and anthropological research that scrutinizes the associations of humans and technologies qua non-humans, there still is a strong temptation “to leave non-humans to the care of technologists or to study the impact of black-boxed techniques upon the evolution of social groups” (Johnson [Bruno Latour], 1988, p. 298).

A form of upward reduction to its effects (Harman, 2014), black-boxing is an approach in which technological efficiency becomes the sole focus of investigation at the expense of the internal processes and particular, material complexities of the technology generating unique limits and possibilities for the user. Paradoxically, the more efficiently

the technology works, the more obscure it becomes and the less attention is paid to the details of its interaction with human users. In its place, the inputs and outputs of the black-boxed technology, which are essential to the calculation of its efficiency, are the only features deemed to be worth investigation (Latour, 1999, p. 304). The work of technological tools is therefore reduced to a “transitive relation” between the input and the output—between an image or plan and a final object (Ingold, 2010, p. 299).

An actual manifestation of this efficiency-based approach to technology, an approach that regards technology merely as a means to “make tasks simpler” (Norman, 1988, p. 191, as cited in Ingold, 2012, p. 20), is evident in the de facto goal of interface design. Since efficiency is taken to mean an effortless relation with technology to the degree that the human interaction with the technological materiality and the mechanism of the machine ideally become invisible, designers have moved toward creating the perfect black-boxed technology through the seemingly paradoxical task of designing an interface that entirely effaces the interface (Emerson, 2014, p. 2). A black-boxed technology therefore “must work hard to cast the glow of unwork” (Galloway, 2012, p. 25). The enthusiastic attention that has recently been given to various ideas, designs, and concepts related to ‘ubiquitous computing’ (e.g., the MIT Media Lab’s (1995) *Things That Think* consortium) illustrates the dominance of this seemingly “interface-free” approach (Emerson, 2014, p. x) to human-to-hardware and human-to-software interfaces—an approach that only focuses on the facilitating function of the interface and closes its eyes on its regulating role (Galloway, 2015). However, although a sole focus on inputs and outputs aims at rendering material, technical work altogether invisible (Zielinski, 2006, p. 33) by basically concealing the interface to incorporate technology

into the user's *natural* life, it in fact helps perpetuate a Great Divides (Latour, 1993) understanding in which technology is considered to be dissociated from its human user who in turn remains untouched by the technology he or she uses to achieve planned goals. Here, union, in other words, is only a symptom of its opposite, divide.

Questioning this view of technology, in this chapter I consider blogging as a technological medium to be more than a simple neutral carrier of its user's will and examine it as a technological object that contributes to the formation of the user's self in a particular way. By particular, though, I do not mean a preconceived self.⁸⁸ Although the material design of the technological medium of blogging opens up particular paths for fashioning the self, the outcome, the fashioned self, cannot be known prior to the blogger-blog interaction at any given time. To demonstrate this interaction, and in an effort to avoid black-boxing the medium, I draw attention to the ways in which the interfaces of blogging services specifically limit, enable, and program bloggers. In other words, in studying the blogger-blog interaction, I look at how the latter *blogocentrizes* the former while the former *anthropocentrizes* the latter (cf. Morton, 2010). By blogocentrizing I mean how blogs use bloggers to their advantage, at the same time while bloggers anthropocentrize their blogs by treating them as useful tools. I therefore scrutinize the internal, material complexities of blogging as an "expectant system," an organization where non-human entities use the human users to moderate some of the

⁸⁸ This is one way my ethnographic study is differentiated from the experimental ones that argue for certain consequences for the user as the outcome of using certain technologies. For instance, look at the lab study conducted by Jiang, Hou, and Wang (2016) who conclude due to their structural properties (mostly related to fragmentation of information) microblogging technologies make us shallow. These studies also usually link information comprehension (shallow processing of information) to the type of the self the medium creates (shallow users) without showing how.

system's functions. As I show once and again in this chapter, this view of blogging exposes the shortcomings of the dominant understanding of the practice in Iran that considers the medium of blogging to be nothing more than a neutral carrier reflecting the identities of Iranian bloggers (Loewenstein, 2008, p. 58). Contrary to this view, my ethnographic evidence illustrates how the blogging technology programs the bloggers through, among other things, enabling a certain type of temporality for users whereby repetition in the style of *Ecclesiastes* ("nothing new under the sun") creates an unforeseeable and unimagined newness/future. As I examine the blogging technology's script or the way it "attempts to configure the user" through "setting the parameters" for his or her actions (Grint & Woolgar, 1997, p. 71), I argue that blogging contributes differently to the formation of the self than other media of inscription (e.g., writing in a journal) and conclude that, in a process of exchanging properties and interplay with its users, blogging provides bloggers with unprecedented ways to know and create themselves.

Ethnographic evidence from the Persian blogosphere, personal histories of blogs and blogging practices discussed with my interlocutors, culturally-informed examination of a seemingly unrelated but highly relevant debate about prophetic revelations in Islam, and anthropological analyses of the ethnographic data contribute to our understanding of the 'blogging subject' in this chapter. The distributed agency of such a subject guides us to understand humankind as "being-outside-oneself," a view that, following Stiegler (1998, p. 193), makes sense of technology as an outside that constitutes "the very being of what it lies outside of." In line with Arendt's (1958) approach that takes the role of technology seriously in all aspects of human life, this view maintains that instruments

which “we once handled freely have now started to become part of our biological make-up” (Gehlen, 2003, p. 219). If in fact our understanding of technology correlates with an understanding of humankind, the human-user then needs to be understood as one “not consisting only of itself” (Simondon, 2009, p. 6) (cf. Clark, 2003).

4-2- POSTING BECAUSE HAVING NOTHING TO POST

A variation of “certainly not” was the most frequent response I got when I asked my informants whether they thought their blogs would turn out to be what they are today when they first started them. After asking the same question from a few of my informants, I realized that there is a pattern in their responses that makes it relatively easy for them to answer this specific question. It was because they customarily had in mind an oft-told summarizing history of their blogs intertwined with their own biographical history offered to anyone interested. This history gradually developed over time and eventually took form on or around the anniversaries of the blog when the blogger celebrated his or her blogging stint by putting the summarizing history into words and posting it online. It is probably why an interlocutor teasingly likened these concise biographical histories of blogs to wedding toasts or burial speeches “in foreign movies.”⁸⁹ These concise histories, like other histories, addressed the questions of inception, significant episodes, and if it was the case, the blog’s decline or demise. To answer my question of whether they had a prediction of the future of their blog, bloggers

⁸⁹ The celebration of the blog’s anniversary could involve additional elements, including a birthday cake. I briefly describe these rituals in this chapter.

retold a version of this brief history of the course their blogs took before emphasizing the early days of their experience, in order to compare it with how their blogs looked now. The question, in other words, usually invoked the whole history of the blog.

According to these histories, many of my interlocutors became interested in creating their own blogs after stumbling upon other people's blogs or after hearing from their blogger friends about the technology, heated debates in the blogosphere, or related offline activities. Some of my interlocutors had a more or less clear idea about what to write in their blogs before they started. A few other bloggers were very excited about this new tool since they had many ideas to share with the public and were looking for an accessible platform. For example, Nooshin, who was in high school when she started her blog, had too many ideas to decide about the focus of her writing, resulting in deleting a few blogs before she was content with her current one. Others also started blogging with a specific plan of some sorts—a general theme or what that was known in the Persian blogosphere as a 'genre'⁹⁰—usually inspired by their favorite blogs. But in many cases their specific plans later changed when their blogs developed into something different and new.

Nonetheless, for the majority of my interlocutors, blogging was simply a new technology they wished to try out, with no set agenda as to about what they would write. Similar to now very customary practice of joining any new social media platform just because it always seems everyone else is using the service, many of my informants

⁹⁰ Among these genres what in the Persian blogosphere came to be known as the “minimalist” writing—writing very short witty blogposts before the advent and popularity of microblogging tools like Twitter—was perhaps most easily recognizable.

started their blogs without a plan as to what they wanted to write or, even more than that, without clearly knowing what a blog really was. “I was just curious to know what this new and free online service my friends talked about was. I didn’t have any clear idea of what blog was. I think I just thought it was a free personal website, and it was nice to have your own website. How could I then know about what I would write in my blog when I started it?” said Bahman, a prolific blogger in his mid-thirties. Our conversation took place in 2013 when Instagram was becoming exponentially more popular in Iran. Therefore, he naturally used Instagram as an example to illuminate his explanation and illustrate his point:

Do you think Iranians who are joining Instagram know what type of things they want to take a photo of and because of that they create their accounts? Do you think they themselves even believe they’re good photographers? I do not think so. They are signing up because everyone they know is on Instagram now. They create their accounts because their colleagues and cousins and friends are on Instagram. It was the same story when everyone joined Facebook and Orkut and, before them all, the blogosphere. Just look how many Instagramers post photos that they haven’t even taken themselves. They are opening the accounts, but they don’t have any worthy pictures in their phone galleries to share. So they end up posting pictures they download from the Internet, just because they want to be part of the wave (*moj*)—not because they are good photographers or leading an exciting life worth sharing with others or even because they know what Instagram is good for.

The commonly familiar self-criticism of “us Iranians” (*mā īrānīhā*) not knowing the right way of using Western technologies aside, I found this explanation vastly at odds with the dominantly acknowledged reason for a massive interest in blogging and other digital social media platforms in Iran. According to the dominant understanding (Alavi, 2005; Kelly & Etlings, 2008, p. 5; Loewenstein, 2008; Parker, 2007), Iranians became interested in social media because they had been historically denied opportunities to

publicly and freely communicate their thoughts and opinions. In other words, the prevalent understanding states that Iranians, eager to share their opinions with the public, flocked to the Persian blogosphere and later other social media platforms, because they were desperate to be heard but were left with no alternative ways of expressing themselves due to the government's strict control over conventional media. It is presumed that because centrally-controlled media, such as national television and radio networks, as well as closely monitored ones, like print media, did not reflect the voices and values of their audience, Iranians welcomed the new participatory Web 2.0-based media so they could express their real selves and reflect their true identities—identities that up to that point were either silenced or misrepresented in other outlets.

In contrast to this assumption, Bahman explained that users' introduction into online services was not planned and also not out of a necessity to be heard. It certainly does not mean that a lack of true representation in conventional media did not contribute to the Iranians' interest in blogging. However, it was neither the sole nor probably the most significant reason for joining the blogosphere. In many cases, Iranians' initial interest in these online services and subsequent use of them were conversely for its own sake. In other words, they used the services simply because the online social media were appealing to use. Moreover, according to Bahman, users did not always use these services as intended or prescribed by the designers. Instagram, for example, is designed for people to share the photos they snap with their mobile phones (Instagram.com), not for reposting publicly available pictures taken by others.

Consistent with Bahman's description, I found that the majority of my informants started their blogs *not because* they had many otherwise silenced opinions and stories to

share with the public, but they did so *in spite of* not having that much to say.⁹¹ It may also explain why re-blogging someone else's blogposts (both plagiarized or carefully referenced by including hyperlinks) and reposting poems and other literary works easily available in print or on the net were common blogging practices among my interlocutors and their network of fellow bloggers. Likewise, there were numerous blogs that were simply collections of their bloggers' favorite selected content taken from other online or print media in the fashion of scrapbooking. As they surfed the web, the *flâneurs* of the Persian blogosphere (or as they were known, *vebgard* (web-patrollers), a play on the word *velgard* (a stray person)) reposted in their blogs what they found interesting. To Iranian bloggers, these blogs were reminiscent of the tradition of Shaikh Bahai's book, *Kaškūl*, and hence bearing the title: Mohsen's Kaškūl; My Kaškūl: From Everywhere and about Everything; A History Kaškūl; etc. A very familiar genre to contemporary Persian speakers and an early example of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999), Shaikh Bahai's *Kaškūl* is a compilation of fragments the Safavid-era polymath found interesting and copied down in his notebook. The compilation is called *Kaškūl* in allusion to the container carried by dervishes in which people dropped their donations of various forms. At the end of the day, when the Kaškūl container was emptied, a varied collection of things would be recovered. Just like the container, Shaikh Bahai's book includes an unorganized variety of topics ranging from mathematical proofs to hadith and prayers (Bosworth, 1989; Zakeri, 2010 [1388]) and enjoys popularity among readers of various

⁹¹ In Chapter 5, I show how bloggers write original posts when they do not have any specific ideas to write about.

educational backgrounds in Iran who easily find something fitting their reading interests in the book.

My intention here is not to discount the significance of the work of the digital-era *flâneurs* who reposted other people's writings. They after all were not online *badauds* who just "walk along in heedless inattention" (Balzac, 1974, p. 330 as cited in Harvey, 2003, p. 54). However, these examples problematize the erroneous assumption that the popularity of blogging in Iran was solely an intentional reaction to governmental silencing of opinions (Loewenstein, 2008). It also demonstrates continuity between the existing offline, historical literary genres and the evolving blogging practices. Still more importantly, this assumption is only one link in a chain of flawed assumptions that collectively imply that the bloggers' selves, although silenced, are already fully made and bloggers simply use their blogs as a clean slate to publicly demonstrate those suppressed selves in writing. As such, this *tabula rasa* understanding of the blogging technology works in tandem with an understanding of the self as already-made to contribute to a problematic depiction of the Persian blogosphere. Another chain in the link is the assumption correlating with a black-boxing approach in which the input and output—the blogger's thoughts, opinions, and feelings allegedly located in his or her interiority, and his or her written words in the blog, respectively—are the only worthwhile pieces of the problem that need to be studied. In this perspective, since the medium is understood to be a neutral carrier whose properties (its materiality and internal complexities) do not affect, create new opportunities for, or limit the user's self, in an act of reverse engineering, the blogposts (i.e., the outputs) are usually examined in order for researchers to learn about the bloggers' already-made (albeit silenced) selves and identities (i.e., the inputs)—their

true and genuine interiorities that due to media censorship and misrepresentation never had the chance to be heard.

Later in this chapter, I will return to Bahman and his story of how the blogging service's interface compelled him to become a blogger and helped him develop new skills, and in his own words, turn him into a new person. But his description of why people joined the blogosphere shows that in contrast to the view holding that it is the human-users who calculatingly choose technological tools to efficiently achieve their planned goals, sometimes it is the tools that program and configure their users. In other words, individuals are interpellated by technological tools and become *users* when technological tools in general, and blogging as a specific technological medium, construct them as users. Although the notion of media interpellating subjects has been acknowledged and studied, among others, in Critical Theory and most famously in Adorno and Horkheimer's (1997) idea of the culture industry, interpellation here does not simply work through and limited to media text (e.g., predictable movie scenarios and reoccurring words in short stories (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997, pp. 98-99)). Beyond (and, if it is the case, in absent of) text, information, and meaning, the interpellation here is conversely due to media's materiality, design, and formal properties. In the rest of this chapter, I look at some examples of the "material interpellation" of the media in the context of the Persian blogosphere and discuss different ways the blogging technology produces individuals as subjects proper.

4-3- “WHERE WAS I?”

As she was telling the story of how she got interested in blogging, Nazanin, a long-time blogger pointed out how her friend’s introduction of this technological medium in a passing conversation at a time when she had little social life convinced her to create her own blog. At the time, Nazanin was a government employee single mom living with her daughter in a small town in South Iran far from the rest of her family. She told me in one of our first conversations:

The government-owned house (*xūne sāzmānī*) I was living in was far from any real, exciting action. I spent my spare time crocheting and solving crossword puzzles [the exemplary “old people” pastimes], while Negar, my daughter, was watching cartoons on TV. I wasn’t a heavy user of the Internet in general, because the available content didn’t seem very exciting back then. Among all that was available on the web, I only found the chatrooms interesting, until the same friend who first hooked me up to the Internet, mentioned some blogs and introduced me to some of her favorites. I don’t know why, but I was sold after I read a few blogposts. Shortly after then, I opened my own blog in Persianblog[.com].

After creating her blog, indecisive about what to write or if her “boring life” would offer enough to maintain her blog for a long period of time, Nazanin initially found herself blogging about her child-rearing experiences and sharing self-discovered parenting tips—the type of topics she “was familiar with and obviously could write about.” She wrote mostly about these topics because, in her own words, “as long as I am busy bringing up Negar,” and I interrupted “which means for the next 50 years,” referring to Iranian mom’s intensive parenting, “I could be sure that there always is something to write about,” she added while laughingly confirming my interjection. She, however, blogged about these specific topics, not because she thought of herself at the time as an expert in these subject matters or someone who necessarily knew more than other

mothers in the Persian blogosphere (although in retrospect “there weren’t that many of them” when she started blogging), but because she was bored at home and wanted to “fill [her] blog (*veblāg ro por konam*).” Her choice of words (i.e., to fill the blog) sounded to me very mechanical to describe the thoughtful and profound practice of content production. I told Nazanin that in fact it reminded me of my memories back in middle and grade school in Iran. When assigned essays and told that we needed to write a certain number of pages, we literally filled (*por kardan*) the pages. There inevitably existed some informal guidelines including memorizing and then modifying formulaic introductions and conclusions especially in essay writing (*enšā*) exams when time was limited. In a similar vein, in grade school we had to fill a whole page by replicating the single model word written by the teacher or our parents on the top of the page. Likewise, considering it to be busywork, to fill the page faster, we sometimes created wider margins when vertically ruling notebook pages—a benign cheat that made our parents mad because notebooks during the Iran-Iraq war were a rationed commodity usually bought by coupons. As we were chatting about these parts and parcels of our generational collective memory, Nazanin and I mocked the awful but nostalgic graphic design of the covers of the government-manufactured notebooks as well as some of the ridiculous formulaic essay introductions we still knew by heart: “Now that I am holding the pen in my hand and want to write about X (substitute X with the prompt of the essay), it surely seems clear that....”

Returning to the original topic of the conversation, using the same verb, *por kardan*, Nazanin said that exactly because she did not want to produce useless posts, like the paragraphs we had memorized in school, she chose to “fill [her] blog” with the

content related to the most accessible topics to her—i.e., parenting and child-rearing. Her subsequent identity as an amateur parenting expert on whose advice the readers of her blog counted was therefore a consequence of her blogging—something that she had not exactly planned for. Before her blog, she was a first-time mother privately raising her daughter. Once she started her blog and after readers found her blogposts helpful, she became an ‘expert’.

Even though she teasingly used the title *mošāver-e kūdak* or ‘child consultant’ to describe herself several times when she was talking about this period of her blogging, she obviously considered herself an expert when, among other things, she told me: “I gave good, balanced parenting advice when unlike now regular consulting with child psychologists was not every mom’s obsession. All I believed in was a style of parenting in which parents both invest in the future of the kid, especially his or her education, but also let the kid participate in childish activities [*bezāran bačegī kone*].” Although she was too humble to openly acknowledge that she was now a parenting expert, her indirect reference to what her readers thought of her also made it clear that she in fact considered herself one. Still more, she had a socio-politically and economically informed critique of her field of amateur expertise. Her critical view of a recent massive interest in parenting techniques and child psychology in Iran included a critique of an increasingly privatized educational system, a culture of individual responsibility in which bad parenting and turning out economically poor in the future were correlated, and an ideological view that perceives ‘traditional’ parenting as ignorant and a disgraceful crime to innocent children. As an outsider observing similar trends in the Iranian society but not particularly interested in the subject matter, I found Nazanin’s critique extremely compelling and

nothing short of an expert viewpoint. What I was specifically interested in, though, was the role the technological medium of blogging played in her becoming. It seemed to me that the technology, the blog interface itself or in fact the empty space it offered and its demand to be filled, contributed to the creation of Nazanin's identity as an amateur expert since it compelled her to write about a topic with which she could keep her blog always updated (i.e., filled) and alive.⁹² Although the content she produced was meaningful and certainly useful to others, it was a secondary outcome of Nazanin's using-for-its-own-sake interaction with the blogging interface.

Nazanin's personal voice was not absolutely absent from the blogposts written in this period as her writing clearly reflected her individual experience as a mother with a specific socio-economic background. However, the focus of the blogposts was not *her* since they did not clearly indicate her personal history and details of her life outside parenting relations. In fact, since the blogposts were not uniquely personal, they also became relatively popular and were copied in other blogs (and in one case in a print magazine) with or without acknowledging the source—something that not only did not upset Nazanin, but also gave her confidence and proved it to herself that she is a good writer and more importantly an excellent expert whose advice is worthy of being followed and shared. Following her success and since her blogposts were popular, she received questions from readers about parenting through emails and in the comment section of the blog. To answer specific questions, she sometimes had to conduct some

⁹² Later in this chapter, I give examples of how Iranian bloggers anthropomorphize their blogs. In fact, Nazani's taking care of her blog and her care for her daughter had many things in common. I soon show that there is also a correspondence between a change in her lifestyle and a change in her blogging practice.

research on the Internet: “I spent hours on the Internet after the company’s mini-bus (*servīs*) dropped me off at home. I responded to fan comments and questions. If I didn’t know what to say, I had to research it. I used dictionary software both to figure out what keywords I should Google [in English] and also to make sense of what I found online.” No longer a for-its-own-sake, blogging had now become a serious task. No longer a bored single mom far from any exciting social action, Nazanin had now become a reliable parenting expert at the center of the attention of a relatively large group of readers.

The reality of Nazanin’s personal life, including that she was a young divorcée, a single mom working in a place far from her family and social support network, was barely reflected in her writing that included for example her modern interpretation of traditional Islamic weaning techniques, her advice on the proper age children should sleep in their own beds separate from parents, her reasoning for favoring some games over others, and her recommendation about how much screen time kids should be given. The more she wrote, the more her blogposts, written in a generalized voice, resembled the tips and tricks columns of the Iranian popular weekly magazines primarily marketed to women—precisely the type of offline print media she was consuming and at times interacting with when she started her blog. Nazanin’s interest in blogging was therefore not due to an absolute lack of representation in conventional media as her approach to parenting was not generally novel, unheard of, unique, or controversial. Her voice was also literally reflected in her favorite weekly print magazine, *Xānevāde-ye Sabz* (The Green Family), in whose contests she sometimes participated for example by sending photos of her daughter, Negar, and whose editors sometimes published some of her

feedback in the Voice of Readers (*sedā-ye xānandegān*) column. In other words, not only did the existing relevant print media adequately reflect Nazanin's voice and her views, her offline media experience shaped her blog's genre.⁹³ Therefore, when I specifically asked if blogging for her was a 'revolutionary' (*enqelābī*) tool—the adjective with which the practice of blogging in Iran and in the Middle East, more generally, was largely described—she responded unsurely: "I'm not sure; maybe." Although an important part of her life, Nazanin did not particularly and definitively remember her blogging to be 'revolutionary'. Given the significant changes she attributed to her blog in the brief history she shared with me, I concluded that she was reluctant to describe these changes and the tool that helped them as revolutionary, because there still were many continuities between her offline life prior to blogging and her online life after that. It is true that thanks to her blog she was now someone that she was not before she started her blog: a celebrity with fans and an amateur expert with demand for her advice. But still her blog was mostly the result of an inadvertent introduction and not a carefully planned strategy to change her life: the theme of her blog reflected the role with which she was already identifying the most (i.e., a mother; the role around which her everyday life was revolving), and her blogging itself was an expansion of (and not a disjuncture from) her experience with existing offline media.

A revolutionary (*enqelābī*) medium is usually a way people describe blogging in particular and new media in general. We talked about why it is described as such. My

⁹³ Some existing accounts overlook individual interactions with conventional media in Iran. In this way, they perfectly fit the perceived picture of voiceless people to whom the Internet in general and social media, in particular, gave voice.

question of whether she saw her blog to be revolutionary led our conversation to another episode of her blog's history since she clearly noted that if there was anything revolutionary about her blogging, it took place a year later. Her blogging practice was challenged in that turning moment when she realized that her blog "was jam-packed with kids-related stuff (*bā masāyel-e kūdak por-e por šode būd*)." This realization, interestingly articulated by using the word *por*, filled, let her perceive of "a bitter truth" (*vaqe'īyat-e talx*) in her life: "It [my blog] opened my eyes." Only then did she feel she needed to "open up some space" for herself in her blog (*tū veblāgam vāse xodam jā bāz konam*) and more generally in her life. Although no longer the same bored person passing time by solving crossword puzzles and crocheting, this time distraught by her lifestyle, she let her blog "make a newer human being (*ādam-e tāze-tarī*)" of her. She clearly remembered that a day or two after the first anniversary of her blog when she was still responding to her readers' congratulatory comments, she paid a thorough visit to her blog's archive where her blogposts were organized and stored chronologically by month:

The comments gave me a feeling of accomplishment. I wanted to give myself a big pat on the shoulder (*be xodam eyval begam*). I was a successful blogger on all counts. I started to review my archive to see how much I've achieved. It adds up very slowly and you don't realize how much you have actually written. At the end of the year when you look at your blog's archive, you get surprised. You see the list of months created automatically [in your blog's archive] as you produce blogposts. You click on each month, see the old blogposts, and ask yourself: "Have I really written all of these posts?" But surprisingly (*dar kamāl-e ta'ajjob*) browsing my archive and rereading some of my blogposts didn't make me happy. Quite the reverse, I was scared (*baraks vahšat baram dāšt*). I was scared and sad. Not the type of sad you become after everyone leaves your birthday party and you realize that you're a year older. My blog was a year older, but it was different. I remember that it was a grim evening. I was going through my archive and suddenly, the reality collapsed on me (*haqīqat saram āvār šod*). My mouth got dry and I broke into a cold sweat. Where was I [in those blogposts] (*Man kojā būdam*)? Where was Nazanin? My life was reduced (*xolāse šode būd*) to Negar and to providing children-related advice for others who also identified themselves

primarily with their kids, like Babak's Mom, Mom of the Cute Babies (*māmān-e nīnī xošgelā*), etc. There was no single blogpost that was simply about Nazanin, about me.

After this revelation, Nazanin decided to focus her writing more on herself: "I promised myself that only when I write five blogposts about myself, my feelings, my past, who I am, where I have come from, why I ended up in that place in the middle of nowhere (*nākojā-ābād*), and my future plans, I'm allowed to write one post about Negar and other motherly and parenting stuff." When she just started blogging, her blog was empty and needed to be filled. Now it seemed too full to her with only one topic laying bare the fact that other important dimensions of her life were forgotten. Prior to this, Nazanin's blog's archive was only chronologically organized. Now she decided to archive her blogposts by topic categories too. She created a new topic category, 'Personal (*šaxsī*)' to organize her blogposts about herself: "I promised myself that by the next anniversary of my blog, this category should be filled with stuff about my own personal life; with adult-life things that are not about kids. I didn't want the same terrible feeling of loss and defeat (*ehsās-e bad-e qobn-o šekast*) at my blog's next anniversary." Again, her blog and its archiving organization created a new empty space (a topic category) that needed to be *filled*. The spatial understanding of her blog (as in filling an empty category-space) corresponded to a spatial interpretation of her life (as in opening up new spaces of opportunity in her life for herself). In this way, her blog both showed to her who she is (by for example revealing to her the full and empty spaces in the blog) and helped her change (by itself changing, and for instance, opening new spaces in life that needed her attention). It is fair to say that Nazanin and her blog coevolved.

Although the *content* of Nazanin’s postings—that they are excessively focused on the subject of parenting and child-rearing—was the aspect of her life that she wished to change, her blog supported the change through its *formal* properties and its mechanism or logic of storing and sorting data. In other words, it was the material incarnation her blog gave to the content (e.g., by adding one line to the blog’s chronological archive as long as she wrote at least one blogpost every month) that frightened her. Also, they were similar materializations provided by her blog (e.g., by offering an empty space that demanded to be filled) that gave her hope. Cannot we then say that the blog’s logic of sorting and storing data shaped Nazanin’s understanding of her life? Was Nazanin’s life not understood in terms of blogging’s spatial organization of the content? Reasoning in a similar vein, anthropologist H  l  ne Mialet (2012, p. 20) in her ethnographic study of Stephen Hawking observes a “strange symmetry” between the binary logic of Hawking’s computer and his communication with his assistants. Likewise, she sees “an extraordinarily similarity in the interaction between Hawking and his technicians and Hawking and his computer.”

Another informant compared the lines in a blog’s chronological archive to the annual rings of a tree trunk. Similar to dendrochronology, one can usually determine the age of a blog by noting nothing more than the number of lines in the blog’s chronological archive. But for Nazanin, it was not where the value of those lines rested. The lines, more than being a representation of the blog’s age, were like the wrinkles in the elbows of a jacket that “in the language of nineteenth century cloths-makers and repairers” were interestingly called ‘memories’ as they “recorded the body that had inhabited the garment [... and] memorized the interaction, the mutual constitution, of a person and thing”

(Stallybrass, 1998, p. 196).⁹⁴ The important point to take note of here is that the human-user of the coat must not be taken for granted:⁹⁵ not only does the coat become like the person wearing it, but the person wearing the coat also takes the form of the coat. The wrinkles indicate both the coat becoming person-like and the person becoming coat-like. Likewise, there is a “strange symmetry” between Nazanin and her blog not simply because the latter was the representation of the former’s life, but also because the latter’s life had taken on the form of the former. As she was constructing her blog by posting in it, the blog generated a chronological archive that in return changed Nazanin (cf. the notion of becoming as blurring ontological boundaries in Kohn, 2007).

Keeping her promise, Nazanin did not feel the same a year later (and every year since) when she ritually revisited her blog’s archive. A new self, *ādam-e tāze-tarī*, was created with the help of her blog. This transformation, however, does not mean that her plan or decision to change, in conjunction with a blog offering its particular capacities and forms for material incarnation of information, made the change automatically possible. Ethnographic evidence of bloggers who were not able to achieve their desired, planned changes abounds in my field notes. A blogger who changed the topic of his blog

⁹⁴ “A Cry,” a poem by one of the best-known contemporary Iranian poets, Mehdi Akhavan Sales (d. 1990), describes the poet trying to save objects inside his house that has caught on fire. In the poem, the poet puts himself in extreme and seemingly unnecessary danger to save the objects (from rugs to books to planted flowers), not because of their monetary value, but because they have recorded in them their interactions with the poet and their mutual construction (when he was sick “*rūz-hā-ye saxt-e bīmārī*”; when he was distressed “*šab-e rosvā-ye bī-sāhel*”) so much so that they are now his existence, being, and life (“*būd-e man*”)—and not simply his properties. Later in the chapter, again by drawing on Stallybrass (1998), I look at the thingliness of blogs, in contrast to their commodity-ness.

⁹⁵ Betraying anthropology’s mandate to study “conditions and potentials of human *life*,” taking the life of the human-user for granted—thinking of human life in terms of cultural and natural patterns “already assembled and joined up”—is to “banish *life*” (Ingold, 2010, p. 299; emphasis is mine) from our anthropological accounts.

to the memories of her late mom after her death, in a post titled ‘On the Uselessness of Writing’ wrote:

I do not know why I write these notes. I started a week after my mother’s death. I was writing [my notes] in a Gmail draft mail. One day, instead of saving [the draft] I hit the icon next to it; the garbage bin icon. All my writing was deleted. I struggled for several hours to recover the notes. Futile (*bīfāyede*). Then I thought it didn’t make a difference. But I wasn’t looking for an effect or benefit. Writing these notes doesn’t help me. It’s an ancient lie that writing calms you. [...] Every day, after I wake up, I ask myself if she is really gone. And after I make sure [that she is gone], I get up, turn on the stove to boil the water for tea (*zīr-e ketrī rā rošan mīkonam*) because there is nothing else that can be done. In addition to that my writing doesn’t heal, the notes aren’t of an intrinsic value (*nevešte-hā ham be xodī-ye xod arzešt nadārand*). What problem does recording my feelings after my mother’s death solve? For how long do I want to stretch these [notes] (*tā kojā mixāham inhā rā keš bedaham*)? It’s probably why my previous notes are gone. The message was clear: don’t struggle (*dast-o pā nazan*).

In fact, my point is that the practice of blogging, at least the type I studied in my fieldwork research, is all about “hopes and dreams rather than plans and predictions” (Ingold, 2012, p. 29). Specific plans, designs, desires, and decisions (if particular ones exist when someone writes, in the first place) “do not magically transmute into forms they specify” (Ingold, 2012, p. 26). Taking place in the larger context of her life, Nazanin’s purposeful, never-ending work in keeping her promise while interacting with her blog encouraging her efforts was indeed required for the change. Being a Heideggerian (1971b) *thing* (rather than an *object*),⁹⁶ her blog with its specific properties and capacities, nevertheless, engaged with her *closely* to open up a path for her goal—a path that she followed. Where the path would take her was, however, not predetermined

⁹⁶ Heideggerian notions of object and thing correspond to, respectively, building (that ends up in something built) and dwelling (that opens up and carries on). A blog is never built; it is never done and always carries on—in the comment section (when someone reads an old post and leaves a comment) or the list of other blogs (when they got updated and move to the top of the list), even when the blogger does not update the blog itself.

(cf. the concept of producer as wayfarer in Ingold, 2010, p. 300) as the new space of possibility created for her was not an outcome of a cause-and-effect relation between her and her blog. While predetermination is about the past and the known, about ‘archives’ with which blogs are usually associated, anticipation, which in my opinion describes blogging better, is about the future and the potential. I shortly discuss the relation between the past and the future, the known and the potential, in the practice of blogging. But it is important to note that all my interlocutors, in one form or another, expressed their surprise of what their blogs turned out to look.

Although in the brief history of Nazanin’s blogging practice, both she and her blog ultimately bore little similarity to the person she was, and the blog she started in the beginning of her account, the new self that the new media helped create was informed by and in conversation with the old self and the age-old, conventional print media with which Nazanin interacted. As such, an efficiency-based analysis of technology that only focuses on the impact of blogging on the lives of the likes of Nazanin by arguing that the technology lets an international community hear the voices of the lay people living in far-away places fails to fully explain the significance of the practice as it portrays people as undiscovered (and at times untouched by media) whose otherwise unheard-of voices become known thanks to the technological medium of blogging. In reality though many of those voices were created through—and not simply discovered by virtue of—blogging and its medium-specific logic, formal properties and structure, just as they were previously constructed by other media.

Blogging as a specific medium has its own particular capacities—some intentionally designed to fulfill certain functions and some additional capacities not

intended by designers. Blogging as I shortly show in the rest of this chapter is part of a blogger-blog collective within which it plays a co-constituting and therefore active role. It indeed lets people change.

In Nazanin's account, like in many other bloggers' concise blogging histories, three points stand out: (1) for bloggers a new self—or “a newer human being”, using Nazanin's language—can be achieved through an interaction with their blogs; (2) although not always put in these terms, in hindsight bloggers are *surprised* of what their blogs turned out to be; and finally, (3) in retrospect, blogs are usually undetermined as their themes and focuses considerably change before they are settled. These three key points suggest that an interaction of multiple actors ranging from the technology to signs to humans is at work contributing to a self whose creation cannot be limited to any *one* agency. Also, these points allude to the fact that technology and humans are interwoven in a mutual becoming. More specifically, while the first point indicates the role of technological medium of blogging with its capacity to archive and to foster communities of bloggers in self-crafting, the second point speaks to a certain temporality that the technology of blogging allows, and finally the third point bears witness to blogging as an “expectant” system. These three points buried deep in the summarizing histories of blogs are interconnected and collectively guide us to understand how blogging contributes to the creation of what it seems to innocently represent.

4-4- THE MACHINE’S GAZE: “LOOKED ME IN THE EYES AND BEGGED ME TO WRITE”

As a conceptual knot helping fasten the three points listed above, the concept of expectant system provides us with an analytic tool to examine how blogging as a specific technology of inscription contributes to the creation of the self. In a theoretical approach to the history of computing from an organizational perspective, Ekbia and Nardi (2014) contrast the better-known epoch of automation to that of heteromation, a phase in the history of computing where some critical tasks are pushed “to end users as indispensable mediators.” Using the notion of expectant organization, they describe the division of labor between machines and their human users in this era. Following this characterization, an expectant system can be defined as a system with considerable built-in holes and gaps that are intended to be filled and bridged by the end user (Ekbia et al., 2015). The holes and gaps (intended or coincidental) that determine what users should do while interacting with technological tools are not confined to expectant systems. The holes and gaps, or following Flusser in his etymological inquiry of the word ‘design’, the traps and tricks, are essential to all design objects that “artfully seduce mankind” (Flusser, 1995, pp. 50-51). Although expectancy on the part of the system—that it awaits human interaction so it could function—can be observed in all sorts of technologies, the expectant organization is more salient in “objectifying technologies” that operate based on what Ekbia and Nardi (2012) term somewhere else “inverse instrumentality” (cf. the notion of “meditationl logic” in Schüll, 2012, p. 20). These technologies, unlike “automation technologies” that disallow user’s intervention to a great extent, delegate some of their most significant tasks to end users and as a result, turn users into the

instruments of their functionality. The technology therefore needs the user to mediate its functions. Clearer than in any other systems, users are constructed by what we may call the machine's gaze when they interact with expectant systems. This view in fact offers an unconventional correlationist view—a correlationism that is not centered on the perception of humans as technologies *technocentrize* their human users and appropriate them for their own needs. Expectant systems in other words *use the users* as vehicles to accomplish their goals and mediate their interactions with other technologies.

The brief histories that my informants provided when talking about their blogging stints made the expectations of the technological medium of blogging visible. Containing nothing significantly more than just a title at the outset, freshly-created blogs were essentially blank webpages presented in a default template design. The amount of effort bloggers put in their blogs usually determined whether for them blogging turned into a serious activity or remained a short-lived hobby. This effort was sometimes a response to the expectations of the technological medium from its user as we saw in Nazanin's account when she mentioned she decidedly chose the theme of parenting advice because she wanted to fill up her empty blog. A "black structural hole" (Ekbia & Nardi, 2014) demanding content, her blog's interface compelled her to write about a topic that can maintain it.

Similar to Nazanin's experience, providing content, original or otherwise, was typically the most obvious first step bloggers took after creating their blogs. Then, depending on how they wanted their blogs to work, bloggers normally solicited readership. Writing attention-grabbing blogposts was necessary to have an audience, but it was not enough as blogs were usually unknown to potential readers. The most common

method of advertising one's blog was based on the principle of reciprocity and was done by leaving comments on other blogs—especially those that bloggers themselves enthusiastically read and admired. Bloggers sometimes also shared their blogposts on other social media platforms or submitted their posts to feed aggregators, so they could get more readership. They also asked other bloggers to post their blogs' URL on theirs in exchange of doing the same on their own blogs. The reciprocal exchange of links in many cases resulted in forming blogging alliances—groups of bloggers who were interested in each other's blogs, left comments on each other's blogposts, engaged in discussions around certain topics, and at times defended their friends in debates outside their circle. Also to maintain their blogs, bloggers actively deleted spam comments. Many bloggers, moreover, modified their blogs' interface and the graphic design of the blog itself. Without all the effort they put in their blogs, they would not function the way bloggers wanted them to operate. But how did the technology of blogging made its expectations known to the bloggers and how did these expectations shape the bloggers?

In remembering his early days of blogging, Bahman pointed out in a conversation that he sometimes posted on his blog “a few times a day” not because he considerably had more to say when he started his blog, but because when he was comparing his newly born blog with older ones in the blogosphere, he “was embarrassed and didn't like it empty, like a barren desert (*bīyābūn-e bī āb-o alaf*).” For him, not only did the main area of the blog where the blogposts appear look better when it was filled with “words, sentences, and good-shaped (*xoš form*) paragraphs,” but also the left-hand side column of his blog looked better too “when there were things there—like links to archived content, archive categories, and links to other people's blogs.” Answering his blog's demand to

look more like the older blogs in the Persian blogosphere, he started forming his own network of bloggers so he could post their URLs in his blog. His blog, in other words, used Bahman to link it to other blogs—to mediate its interaction with other blogs. Bahman talked about his blog in a way that it evoked animistic beliefs in objects having a life (Rod & Kera, 2010). He contended that he wrote more frequently and was more active during the first months after he created his blog because “it was as if the empty spaces in the blog looked me in the eyes, begging me to write something—anything (*eltemās mīkard ye čīzī benevīsam, hālā harčīzī*).”⁹⁷ In a similar vein, others described their blogs as human kids who needed the care of their parents. The common practice of celebrating the anniversary of a blog was called the birthday of the blog and similar to parents celebrating their kid’s birthdays, bloggers sometimes celebrated the birth of their blogs by buying cakes, blowing candles, and posting the pictures on their blogs. Afsoon (a blogger whom I mentioned in the previous chapter), a formerly prolific blogger who practically stopped posting near the end of my fieldwork, told me once that blogs are like human babies (not any other animal babies) because just like human babies they are born prematurely and similar to human babies requiring more attention compared to other animals, blogs need more active attention than Facebook profiles (cf. the discussion of the Tmagotchi, the Furby, and other digital pets in: Turkle, 2011).

Like Nazanin who chose a specific topic so she could meaningfully maintain her blog, Bahman did not want to write about just anything so his blog could look full and alive: “I did not want to embarrass myself to escape another embarrassment.” So, to

⁹⁷ It may remind one of Mauss’s (2001, p. 58) account of the copper object that demands to be given away.

fulfill his blog's hankering for more posts without adding to his embarrassment of writing about tasteless topics, Bahman started to pay more attention to himself and his surroundings and to think more deeply about his experiences:

I needed more meaningful things to say. So, I started to pay attention to things that I had never attended to. I used not to pay attention to details or to my emotions, as a matter of fact. In the past, I did not really look that much for meaning behind everything. I was really a shallow person (*ādam-e sathī*). I can even say, I was a boring person with nothing interesting to say. I now had to pay more attention to feed my blog (*xorāk barāye veblāgam tahaye konam*). But even more importantly, I didn't think of myself as a creative person in the past. So, it came to me as a big surprise when for the first time in the comment section my readers applauded my writing for its creativity.

Bahman was made subject (Foucault, 1982, p. 777) by being voluntarily objectified by his own blog. As he responded to the expectations of his blog, he was transformed into a certain subject, a creative person with a good eye for details. The “obligatory syntax” of the medium, or more accurately its recipe as it did not include “explicit and obligatory prescriptions” (Foucault, 1977, p. 153), enabled a new self. More specifically, Bahman's blog communicated its recipe for constituting a suitable blogger-blog collective *negatively* through an aesthetic judgment by showing how *ugly* and *useless* (*zešt-o bīxasīyat*) it looks when it is unattended: “like the diaries (*daftarče xāterāt*) we were gifted when we were kids and we wrote only in the first two pages before we use the rest of the blank pages to solve school math problems (*qabl az īnke be onvān-e čerknevīs-e rīyāzī az baqīyaš estefāde konīm*).” He noted the disciplinary nature of the recipe by half-jokingly half-seriously pointing out the cruelty of his blog's recipe compared to Facebook's syntax/recipe which is communicated positively by automatically filling out some holes and gaps with tentative suggested items to show how *beautiful* your profile would look if you attend to it. This aesthetically charged recipe is

an example of how what some Science and Technology Studies scholars (Latour, 1992; Latour & Akrich, 1992) call “scripts” demand specific things from the user and invite him or her to intervene in a certain way. The way Bahman’s blog guided and compelled him to perform contributed to his perception of the person he now was.

The blogger-blog collective discussed here is an illustration of the “body-tool [or] body-machine” complex Foucault (1977, p. 153) points out in his cultural history of discipline. This association was formed as soon as the blogger signed up and created his or her blog. However, the relationship between the blogger and the blog was always at the risk of demise. For the collective to maintain itself, the blogger must persistently take care of the blog. In the absence of the necessary work and without the blogger’s care for the blog the assemblage would stop to exist. A myriad of inactive blogs and retired bloggers are an evidence of the incessant care and work required to keep the instability of the assemblage in check. In spite of the required work, there is a tendency to either not consider the blogger-blog collective to be an interdependent assemblage, or the existence of the collective is taken for granted without noting the labor of maintenance, invention, and intervention that goes into the work of holding this heterogeneous complex together (Law, 1992, p. 386). Bahman’s account of his early days of blogging is important, because it bears witness to the kind of care that is required for the process of reproduction and renewal of the relationship between the blogger and the blog that ensures the continuation of the collective.

As I have shown in chapter 3, it is not only the blog whose very existence and function are dependent on the blogger. My findings also indicate that in the Persian blogosphere, bloggers also come to depend on their blog and its care for them to sustain

themselves.⁹⁸ It may then explain why bloggers often hold that to remain sane, they have to frequently resort to their blogs. As mentioned in previous chapter, immediately reminding me of Mircea Eliade's (1959, p. 36) account of axis mundi, the "center of the world" (*markaz-e jahān*) was the phrase an interlocutor used to describe her blog. She wrote to me that she took refuge to her blog and either read or wrote when nothing around her no longer made sense. If Eliade (1959, pp. 44-45) is to be followed, her blog, the place from which a *cosmos* came to birth, was an outcome of the constant act of cosmogony whereby the self (like any other construction that makes sense) was fashioned due to a superabundance of things that did not make sense.⁹⁹

4-5- FOLDABLE BLOGS

"What that really folds is a blog, not a diary," said Sia, a blogger in his late thirties with a college degree in computer engineering who was working as a programmer in the private sector. We were discussing the similarities and differences between blogs and diaries when he decisively, as if he wanted to utter the last words ending the discussion, said: "People usually write diaries in notebooks. Notebooks fold. Folding; it is what notebooks are supposed to do the best, but I always say that what really folds is a blog, not a diary."

⁹⁸ Blogs in this sense illustrate the Merleau-Pontian concept of chiasm. Blogs have a 'hold' on bloggers while bloggers hold their blogs together as they write in and maintain them (cf. chismatic-interlacing relationship between people and places in: Casey, 2004, p. 251).

⁹⁹ Anthropologist Natasha Dow Schüll (2012, p. 20) in her ethnography of machine gambling in Las Vegas gives an account of how technology (the slot machine, in this case), manufactures certainties by forming a zone of insulation from an insecure and capricious human world.

At times, in my interaction with Iranian bloggers, they got upset when I pointed out that people, including some of their own fellow bloggers¹⁰⁰, compared blogging with diary writing. Among other things, their deep-seated aversion to the comparison was due to its use by some established writers and intellectuals (as discussed in chapter 3) to downgrade blogging to something seemingly inconsequential. However, the metaphor Sia used sounded very strange to me because unlike others he neither pointed to the significance of his blogging practice, nor compared the contents fit for each of the two media, nor contrasted the public and private natures of the two forms of writing. Explaining the senselessness of the comparison, he instead brought the materiality and formal properties of the two types of writing into his argument and highlighted a specific technological feature, among its many features, that blogging offered but notebooks lacked. Sensing my confusion, he continued: “Blogs are the most flexible notebooks I’ve ever seen. They fold incredibly and when folding, they put in touch unrelated points in time. All you need is a hyperlink or a hashtag.” He explained that notebooks can seemingly fold too (“they are called foldable notebooks, after all (*esmešūn rūše belaxare: daftarče tāšo*).”) But it is just a design trick so they take less space. Their foldability has very little to do with time as they can only put one certain day adjacent to the day before, and the day after.

Sia, whom I found as witty in person as in his blogposts which I had been following since 2012, characterized himself as “the unluckiest lover in the entire history of romance” and usually wrote about his many unsuccessful relationships as they

¹⁰⁰ Look at chapter 3 for an example of a blogger, Milad, comparing blogging with journal-keeping.

advanced and unfortunately broke up. As he wrote about his romantic life, Sia usually created hyperlinks to his earlier blogposts. These hyperlinks sometimes simply indicated a similar event or mentioned a place he had previously written about. For example, in one post about a date at a certain restaurant, he hyperlinked the name of the restaurant to a post from two years back in which he had mentioned the restaurant as a rendezvous at that time. The hyperlinks at times also connected two posts from two distinct points in time describing similar emotions or different reactions to a similar behavior. For instance, after breaking up with a girlfriend, he blogged about his feelings and by hyperlinking the words “my heart is broken” (*delam šekaste*) to a post about breaking up from three years back, he wrote that he learned from that break-up that mourning for a relationship that is over changes nothing and is not worth it.

The hyperlinks that connected multiple posts and formed a complex network of memories were not constrained to Sia’s blog. The memories in his mind were also now linked and he believed without his blog, his life events probably would have remained distinct or forgotten as they belonged to far-off points in time. But because he had always written about his romantic life (and in fact started blogging after falling in a “serious love for the very first time,”) it did not take long before he realized that his life “is like a movie on repeat.” To elaborate his point, Sia introduced to our conversation a cinematic metaphor: “Everything has happened before at least once in the past. I’m at the point that when something new happens, I can picture the words and sentences I wrote in the past about something similar to or contrary to or in some ways related to the new thing. Everything is a flashback. My life is not just any movie; it’s a movie full of flashbacks.”

In other words, illustrating the technological medium programming the user, Sia's blog not only was, as McLuhan (1964) argues, an extension of his mental abilities helping him amass and arrange his experiences, but for him it also shaped the very condition of understanding of those experiences—it was as if the brain was commanded by the prosthesis how to remember a memory or think of a situation. I however was yet more puzzled by his statement about his life which drove me to ask if he saw the contradiction in his response that I noticed when he used the words “new” and “flashback” in the same sentence. Because if everything was a flashback, nothing could be new. “It is like living in a perpetual state of déjà vu,” I told Sia, to which he responded without a second thought:

I don't think so. Just imagine a movie in which what the hero is about to do can only be explained by a flashback to the past. But as the hero goes back in time and is remembering and recounting the story that took place in the past, he realizes something new about it, because he is a different person now and understands the past event differently. This means the event in the past, the flashback, can no longer explain what that was about to happen—which means something new will happen. Of course, it is an impossible movie scenario, because it constantly changes as it is being written. But if you think about it, it is not that much different from the really flashback-heavy movie scenarios.

Sia, in other words, described a narrative that only can proceed and go forward (with new events) if the narrator is able to go back in time and reflect on a past event. If we take his explanation literally that he has reached a point where he now could remember a written record of a past event in connection to something new, it seemed that for him the events in the past contained in them the future events. As such, pushing his cinematic metaphor further, I gathered that his life was not simply a movie on repeat, full of flashbacks. There were also in his life equal numbers of flashforwards of which he would have been unaware if he had not stored, sorted, and linked them in his blog. This

peculiar movement in opposite directions (that a forward progress is not possible without a backward movement) and also the fact that each of his biographical events encompassed both the past and the future were outcomes of the specific way the formal properties of blogging as a technology of inscription contributed to Sia's thoughts. Blogs, unlike notebooks that only afforded a more or less linear account of events, truly *folded*, and as a result made it possible for unrelated events and points in time to be in direct contact. Hyperlinks, or what Sia probably in order to disparage notebooks that fail to fulfill their main feature (i.e., foldability) called the "folding function of blogs" (*tā-šavandegī-ye veblāgī*) may explain why flashbacks, far from being simply about the past, made his narrative's forward progress possible, why repetition did not produce similarity, and as a result, a new self began to form. In other words, for Sia, with the help of his blog, the outcome of a return to the past was a future and newness was paradoxically a product of repetition. It was why he did not see a contradiction in simultaneity of repetition in his life ("a movie on repeat") and newness of his romantic experiences. Sia returned to the same events recorded in his blog over and over again and the outcome of those visits to the past was always different: hyperlinks in his blog turned *limit* (repetition) into *freedom* (newness).

Avoiding a black-boxing approach to blogging and paying attention to the details of the blogger-blog interaction, we can see that not that much the content of Sia's blog but its method for linking the content made a certain form of temporality available to Sia. His blog's capacity to *fold* redefined Sia's relation to the past and with that it offered him a new and creative way for carrying forward in the present. Hyperlinked blogposts allowed him (or, like what we saw in Nazanin's case, opened a path for him) to redefine

his relation to the past in a specific way without either disowning it or being thoughtlessly attached to it.

4-6- RUMINATION: THE PAST THAT CREATES THE FUTURE

The capacity of blogging to make it easily available to bridge past and future may also explain why another Iranian blogger, Sara, to some degree self-deprecatingly described her activity in her blog with a one-word response, “*nošxār*,” which is the Persian word for rumination—as in the actual act of chewing of the cud which is extremely demeaning when used to describe human activities. Sara contended that all she did was re-chewing her recorded memories in her blogposts to write new ones. Also, the titles of many Iranian blogs included the word *nošxār* which may in fact allude to the same practice of going back to an already consumed thought and turn it into a new idea by re-chewing it—a practice that blogging made easily possible not only through hyperlinks, but also by different ways bloggers could categorize their posts.

Sara illustrated her point about blogging as a means for rumination by talking about her blogposts written about her deceased father with whom she had an extremely problematic relation. Her posts about her father were all grouped separately in a category labeled “This Man Was My Father” (*in mard pedaram būd*). At first, there was an exclamation mark at the end of the sentence-title of the category, indicating disrespect towards her father as with an exclamation mark, the title implied that the father was an evil person. But she later dropped the exclamation mark. Sara explained the change in the category’s title by stating, “It is because things changed between my dad and me. When I

review the posts in this category, I see how much I have changed. In fact, I see how much my view of my father and my idea of family have changed. I am not saying that my problems with my dad magically disappeared. But I think I understand things better now.” Later in the conversation, when I asked why she thought she changed, Sara interestingly mentioned his father’s change as the reason. The change in the relation that was initially linked to her change, now was equally connected to his father’s change: “Sometimes, I am myself shocked. The man about whom I write in my blog these days is not the dad I knew when he died and I started this blog. I am also not the same person, because he changed (*man ūn ādam-e qablī nīstam be xāter-e īnke ūn avaz šod*). He did not become a better or worse person. But he changed posthumously and so did I. The exclamation mark was no longer necessary.”

More interestingly though, like for Sia, for Sara too, change took place in interaction with her blog. Her blog made it possible for her to frequently ruminate, compare, and interpret her relation with her father, in a way that other forms of writing did not offer as it provided her with a dynamic, changing, and complex picture of her father through not only putting her thoughts about her father in a chronological order, but also through grouping them in topic categories and also linking them:

In my blog, I learned not to judge my father based on this or that thing he had done. In my writings, I tried to see why he did the things I hated. And to know why I had to consider things he did collectively together with all things he did even before I was born. When he was alive, he never bothered to explain himself to me. But after he passed away, I helped him explain himself to me. His explanations don’t make him a better person. But I now know something about him that I didn’t know in the past.

Sara's father's *proxy* explanations realized in her blog became available only when Sara had enough written, stored, linked, and sorted material about her father all grouped in a category separate from other things she wrote.

In fact, Sara's blog allowed her to play to herself the role of the "ignorant schoolmaster" (Rancière, 1991)—the teacher who can teach what she does not herself know. Drawing on the career of Joseph Jactot (1770-1840), a French educator who created the method of "Universal Teaching" to show to illiterate parents that they can teach their children to read, Rancière argues that the ignorant schoolmaster does not engage in explication as a way to bridge the gap between his knowledge and that of the students—the pedagogical practice of a conventional teacher who stultifies learning by superfluously shortening the path from what the student already knows to what she does not yet know. Particularly pertinent to Sara's journey was that for Rancière there is always "a third thing—a book or some other piece of writing—" (2009, pp. 14-15) mediating the relationship between the ignorant schoolmaster and the pupil who "must be able to show, in the book, the materiality of everything he sees" (Rancière, 1991, p. 20). While Jactot used the French classic *Télémaque* for this purpose, Sara created hers in her blog that with its categories and links made it impossible for her to avoid the necessary effort needed to learn about her father. Sara's blog, like a schoolmaster, insisted on hearing and storing her thinking which later could be verified against the sorted writings in the category about her father.

In her posts, Sara addressed the father materialized in her writings. When I asked whether she thought her readers also came to the same conclusions when they read the posts in the category, she responded that some did while others did not: "But my dad is

there in that category with all of the changes he went through. I would have concluded the same thing, if he had bothered to explain himself when he was alive.” For Sara, her father is alive in her blog: “I gave him the opportunity to explain himself. He died soon. I gave him life in my blog.” Sara told me that the weekend after she dropped the exclamation mark from the title of the category, she went to visit her father’s grave for the very first time since the funeral rituals four years earlier.

The examples of how Sara and Sia interact with their blogs show that blogging as a technology of writing offers unique ways of sorting, storing, comparing, interpreting, and understanding events in interaction with which bloggers engage in crafting selves. Blogging therefore cannot be described as “a mere mirror of reflected thought”—the expression Malinowski (1989, p. 312) uses to depict writing. It instead, as Stewart (2012, p. 518) defines writing in general, is a “way of thinking.” Far from being a “self-vanishing mediation” (Rancière, 2009, p. 8), blogging actively contributes to the thought of Iranian bloggers.

4-7- OBJECT FETISHISM: AUTONOMOUSLY DETERMINED SELF AND THE POWER OF BLOGS

A passed-away father who continues to live in his daughter’s blog, past memories of romantic failures haunting the present, and a prosthesis—an outside—controlling the brain—the alleged center of the inside... Corresponding to a troupe of spectral figures in his writing, including vampires and the undead (Neocleous, 2003), these manifestations have Marx’s name written all over them. For one, is blogging—a technological machine—not an illustration of Marx’s dead labor sucking, vampire-like, the living labor

of Iranian bloggers and killing their creativity? Building on Adam Smith's concept of contained and required labor and in order to set political economy free from the relations of immediate exchange, Marx famously differentiates between living and dead labor. Living labor, the work of human laborers, is objectified in, among other things, machines—i.e., in dead labor. It is how “what was the living worker's activity becomes the activity of machine” (Marx, 1973, p. 704). When machines do the creative works of humans, as they store, sort, and link data, do they not strip individuals of the innovations of their living labor? Do expectant systems demanding the living labor of users not exploit them in a seemingly mutually satisfying way? Are expectant systems essentially unlike manufacturing equipment requiring workers to use them so a profit in addition to the original investment can be returned? But at the same time is it not true that the blogging interface and its software, “the power of knowledge, objectified” (Marx, 1973, p. 706), contributes to the creation of knowledge—a knowledge about the self that could have not been available otherwise? How is it possible for bloggers to think together with their blogs¹⁰¹ and collaboratively create newness out of repetition and life out of death?

The theoretical attempts to espouse Marx's critical theory to the approaches taking seriously the social life of material things (Castree, 2002; Kirsch & Mitchell, 2004) speak to some similar questions. They aim at adding “some political efficacy” to approaches considering the non-human to have “very real social effects” (Kirsch & Mitchell, 2004, p. 690). Similarly, the addition of new elaborations to the concept of inverse instrumentality, mostly through the introduction of the notion of heteromation, is

¹⁰¹ Thinking together *with* instruments, including writing instruments, has also been studied in the production of scientific (Mialet, 2012) and mathematical (Rotman, 2000) knowledge (cf. Norman, 1993).

intended to make the concept fit the current political-economic conditions of “historically high levels of profit in which no realm of human activity is too private, repetitive, or objectifying to escape capital’s grip” (Ekbia & Nardi, 2014).

Though not discussing here the political economy of ‘prosumption’ in digital social networks and that of online traffic (Cote & Pybus, 2011; Fuchs, 2011; Terranova, 2000), I do not intend to deny the commodity-ness of blogposts and other social media profiles. Although I conducted the majority of my ethnographic fieldwork before selling and trading blogs, as well as Facebook fan pages, Telegram channels, and Instagram accounts, became a considerable avenue for profit in the Iranian online community, and in spite of the fact that the bloggers with whom I worked did not capitalize in any significant way on their blogposts, blogs still sometimes achieved the status of an exchange-value when they were articulated in terms of an equivalence (e.g., in cases when bloggers used online services, mostly out of curiosity and comparison, to appraise the value of their blogs or when they used website statistics tools to get the number of daily unique visits). Acknowledging this, my intention here is nonetheless to return to it the thingliness of blogging, “all its sensuous characteristics” (Marx, 1990, p. 128) and discrete details, by focusing on its particularity and materiality through showing the capacities and complexities of the technology when it is not black-boxed and the effects of its formal properties on users when it is not reduced to already familiar counterparts (e.g., diaries).

In fact, exchange-value and the dominant understanding of technology in general, and technological media in particular, have one thing in common: neither one is conceivable without being emptied out. While “an exchange-value is emptied out of any

useful function” (Stallybrass, 1998, p. 184), technological media in its dominant understanding is emptied out of its internal complexities and depicted as a neutral, perfect carrier. As such, both essentially do not (or are not considered to) *do* things and hence are exchangeable—either with other commodities or other media. Returning its thingliness to the medium of blogging, one sees that Iranian bloggers’ attachment to their blogs and acknowledging their significance in the construction of their thoughts and beliefs (and as I argue in chapter 5, their destiny and fate) does not, moreover, represent a form of commodity fetishism. Instead, it indicates object fetishism—related to the original form of fetish, *feitiço*, with which Marx did not have a problem (Stallybrass, 1998, p. 184); the form that was demonized so in negation of which the pure European subject, uncontaminated by things, can be constructed (Pietz 1985, 1987, as cited in Stallybrass, 1998, p. 185). In this way, blogs are similar to object fetishes that although not part of the individual, they function as his or her “controlling organs at certain moments” (Pietz, 1985, p. 10 as cited in Stallybrass, 1998, p. 185) and represent “a subversion of the ideal of the autonomously determined self” (Pietz, 1987, p. 37 as cited in Stallybrass, 1998, p. 185). In contrast to such a self, the blogging self with its agency distributed in an extended body (Mialet, 2012) which at a minimum is an assembly of the blogger and the blog is a product of the collective work of the two. Blogs as object fetishes are placed outside the person but help constitute his or her very inner self.

4-8- THE PROPHET: THE PERFECT MEDIUM

In addition to the introduction of the abnormal as a negative model, the work of construction of the ideal, normal subject calls for a positive model too. After all, creation and maintenance of a pure subject is no easy task. The counterpart of the negation of an object that affects the self is the sanction of a perfect medium celebrated because it does not add, modify, or subtract. The demonization of the *feitico*, in other words, needs to be complemented by the canonization of the *prophet*.

I became aware of a culturally recognized model for this perfect medium late in spring 2016, when I was writing up the findings of my fieldwork. I received a text message from Ali, a longtime interlocutor, on Telegram Messenger, the most frequently used messaging application in Iran at the time. Probably more than anyone else during my fieldwork, I had talked about the theoretical aspects of my research with Ali, who himself was working on his PhD dissertation in Persian Language and Literature dealing with the morphology of neologisms coined by the Persian Academy (*farhangestān*). The Telegram message contained a download link to the audio version of a two-part, recently televised debate between Abdulkarim Soroush, a massively famous Iranian religious intellectual and Rumi scholar, and Abdolali Bazargan, a liberal politician and Quran scholar. The debate between the two intellectuals, both forced into exile due to threats of persecution and violence, was hosted by the BBC Persian (2016a, 2016b) program, Pargār (The Compass). Since no explanation accompanied the link to the audio files, I did not download them immediately. I thought Ali had shared the links with me just because he thought they were interesting, not because of any specific connection to our previous

conversations throughout my fieldwork. I was used to receiving forwarded, non-research-related, but seemingly “interesting” messages (jokes, short video clips, notes with moral messages, etc.) from my research informants who usually did not expect a response. Awaiting a response though, Ali sent me another message the next day asking: “Brother, did you listen to those two audio attachments? At one point, Soroush in response [to Bazargan] cites a verse from Rumi (*molānā*) saying: ‘The breath that the flute-player blows into the reed-flute/is the quality of the flute and does not correspond to that of the player’ and adds that the reed-flute also contributes to the voice it communicates... (*ney ham dar enteqāl-e sedā madxalīyat dārad*).”

Pleased to see an evidence in Rumi’s *Masnavi* lending support to a non-neutral understanding of technological media (the reed-flute, in this case) and excited that an interlocutor shared with me something that spoke to my research question, I listened to the two-hour-long show. After appreciating Ali for the links, the next thing I wrote to him in our message thread was if he, an expert in Persian literature, can help me fully understand the verse so I could translate it accurately and then include it as an epigraph to this chapter which I was writing when the correspondence took place. In response, he mentioned that Rumi’s *Masnavi* has already been translated by Reynold Nicholson (Rūmī & Nicholson, 1925), a 19th and 20th century British Orientalist and Rumi scholar, and that I should use his translation instead of translating it myself. I found Nicholson’s translation of the verse. However, to my surprise, he had considered the verse to pose a rhetorical question calling for an obvious negative answer and had translated it to make the opposite point upon which Soroush had drawn in the debate: “Is the breath which the flute player blows within the reed-flute suitable (as a quality) to the reed-flute? No, it’s

(something) suitable to the man” (book 2, verse 1793). After letting Ali know about Nicholson’s translation on Telegram, he wrote back that he would check other resources too. A day later, he sent a message saying he consulted a book of commentary on Masnavi by a very well-known Iranian Rumi scholar (Rūmī & Zamānī Ja‘farī, 1389 [2010]) whose interpretation, to our surprise, was in line with that of Nicholson. But Ali also found that Soroush himself in his edition of Masnavi (Rūmī & Soroush, 1377 [1998]) based on the Konya manuscript (the earliest known manuscript of the book completed in 1278, roughly five years after Rumi’s death), expectedly and in line with his later usage of the verse in the debate, did not consider it to be a rhetorical question. In our Telegram exchange, we both found it fascinating that these Rumi scholars’ choice between the two possible readings of the verse corresponds to two radically different “media ideologies” (Gershon, 2010a, 2010b).

Beyond the Rumi verse and the understanding of media’s function it might suggest, the theme of the debate itself spoke to another topic about which Ali and I had previously talked. When discussing the Persian neologism for the word ‘media,’ *rasāne* (literary, conveyer), and those for some other media-related words—a topic of Ali’s own research and expertise—we realized that there are two equivalents for the word messenger. One is *payāmbār or peyqāmbār* (literary, carrier of the message) which is used to describe the divine prophets who receive revelations from god and pass them on to their followers. The other, the approved Persian Academy neologism for the word messenger in the context of media and computer applications, is *payām-rasān* (or conveyer of the message).

Related to the application of the word to describe the work of prophets, the debate that Ali had shared with me, in fact, focused on a new approach to the hugely significant question of divine *vahy* (revelation) in Islam formulated by Soroush. Since 2013, Soroush has started a new project to rethink the role of prophet Mohammad in the writing of the Quran. For Muslims, the Quran is Mohammad's greatest miracle and a proof for his prophecy. In his controversial theory,¹⁰² dubbed sometimes "the prophetic dream" (*ro'yā-ye rasūlāne*), Soroush questions one of the fundamental assumptions shared by the absolute majority of Islamic scholars across Islamic schools and throughout history holding that the Quran is god's *vahy* or revelation. God's words delivered to people by the messenger of Islam (*payāambar-e eslām*)—i.e., prophet Mohammad—, the Quranic verses are believed not to be disturbed by any influences from without, including Mohammad himself. Questioning this dominant view, Soroush suggests that there is evidence in the Quran itself that guides one to understand the book as Mohammad's dreams, as opposed to god's intact words delivered through the archangel Gabriel to Mohammad and then through him to his followers. Expanding on his earlier work (Soroush, 1378 [1999]) arguing that Mohammad became more experienced in his mission over his 23-year-long vocation as a prophet, Soroush's take on *vahy* questions the idea of the prophet as a neutral carrier of god's words. Instead, the prophet is portrayed as a person who saw some visions in his dreams and after waking up, articulated those dreams which later compiled in the Quran. As such, in contrast to the belief of the majority of Islamic scholars, in this theory, the Quran, although god's words, is authored (and not

¹⁰² In addition to talks and debates, this theory has been articulated in a five-part article (Mohammad, the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams) on the Persian section of his website at <http://www.drSORoush.com/fa>

simply mediated) by Mohammad. Therefore, although he is a carrier or messenger of god's speech, the message, his dreams, are discoveries expressed in his own terrestrial language and affected by his ever-developing experiences and skills in receiving *vahy*. Similar to the reed-flute limiting and altering the initial breath the player blows within it, the Quran reflects the firstly limited but ever-expanding qualities of Mohammad, the messenger, in the articulation of the visions he saw in his dreams.

The proponents of the dominant theory, including Abdolali Bazargan, the other side of the debate on the BBC Persian show, however, believe in a *tabula rasa* understanding of Mohammad's mission. The messenger, in this view, is a human-to-god interface, if you wish, that facilitates the communication without affecting the message. To support his argument in the debate, Bazargan refers to the Quran itself where the prophet is described as an *ummi*, traditionally taken to mean illiterate. Although according to some Quran scholars other meanings of the word, including Gentile, native, and ignorant of previous books and scriptures, make a better sense in the context of the verses the word appears (Bell & Watt, 2007, p. 34), the majority of Islamic scholars have considered it to mean illiterate, because according to them "the miraculous character of the [Quran] was enhanced by the assertion [...] that [Mohammad] was illiterate" (Watt, 1969, p. 61). What explanation other than a miracle justifies the fact that an illiterate person can come up with a book regarded as the finest work in the Arab literature: "within the literature of the Arabs, wide and fecund as it is both in poetry and in elevated prose, there is nothing to compare with it" (A. Guillaume as cited in: Arberry, 1955, p. 326)? In other words, Mohammad's illiteracy is deemed necessary to guarantee neutrality of the messenger that ensures the purity of god's speech and hence *his* perfection.

Modeled on the work of the *payāmbār*, the understanding of media as a perfect, neutral conveyer of the human user's thoughts and beliefs, gives humans, in comparison to non-humans, a godlike, dematerialized and transcendental status making them capable of achieving planned changes involving those nonhumans as well as altering themselves. This view functions to create a pure subject ontologically separate from and untouched by the ever-changing material technologies it uses. Soroush's theory of the prophetic dreams and that of his opponents, although about the religious concept of divine *vahy*, reflect distinct media ideologies. But more importantly, like any other ideology, they have ramifications for the question of the subject. While in one the dematerialized subject is untouched by the material objects it acts upon and uses, in the other the subject and object exchange their qualities and are fashioned and refashioned in their interaction. In another talk in the Iranian Association at the University of Toronto (IAUT, 2012) whose video Ali shared with me in the same thread on Telegram, Soroush cites the same Rumi verse again and adds that Mohammad was a reed-flute on god's lips to argue for their extreme closeness and exchange—that like the reed-flute and lips, they were mutually touching one another.

Similar to the reed-flute and lips touching one another, the idea of a mutual construction through touch which coincidentally involves a simple tool, perhaps simpler than the reed-flute, is present in a very short chapter of Roland Barthes' *Empire of Signs* (1982)—an account of an imaginary Orient, a heuristic system revealing to us “the impossibilities of our own” (p. 6). The tool or medium at the heart of that chapter is chopstick, an alimentary instrument, “the converse of our knife (and of its predatory substitute, the fork)” (p. 18). In that chapter, Barthes shows how touch (or in this case, a

very measured, softened pinch, a force not greater than what “is precisely necessary to raise and carry” (p. 16) the foodstuff, helps both the tool and the food it pinches fashion themselves and one another by fulfilling their essences (p. 15). Also, avoiding a black-boxing approach to this simple technical object, Barthes does not reduce chopsticks to their most familiar counterparts, the fork and knife, and their most visible function, “carrying the food from the plate to the mouth” (p. 16). Neither does he simply conceive of chopsticks to be an extension of the human organs, fingers. Instead in an account filled with the most detailed explanations of the ways chopsticks interact with food objects on one hand and its human holder on the other, Barthes contrasts two forms of understanding tools which correspond to the two ideologies of language he discusses in a previous chapter.

4-9- CONCLUSION

In next chapter I will address the role of written language in the creation of the self in the Persian blogosphere. In this chapter, though, I showed the significance of a media analysis that pays heed to the material complexities of the technology and looks at the mutual construction of blogs and their bloggers. In the age of digitized cultures where the likes of Snapchat epitomize the ephemerality of communication, arguments for dematerialization of media have become overwhelmingly commonplace. However, scholars both in anthropology and media studies, have foregrounded the materiality of media to question the dematerialized approach to mediation. In these studies, materiality is used to mean a number of things, from electronic waste to servers, and from the ink

printed on paper to formal properties of technological media. For example, while Goody (1998, pp. 107-111) stresses the role of material expression of emotions on paper in the emergence of romantic love, Parikka (2010) in his media genealogy, focuses on the materiality of media by exposing the historical links that embed media technologies in the natural (or what he describes as the animal and ecological energies of media culture). Similarly, while Hirschkind (2006) in his ethnography focuses on the material qualities of cassette sermons in Egypt and their bodily effect on the sensorium of the audience, Kittler (1999, p. 203) underlines the technological materiality of the medium by referring to Nietzsche's experience in 1882 with a Hanson Writing Ball, a then-advanced typewriter.

The likes of these approaches to media that take materiality seriously still form the minority of studies available. Consistent with the dominant approach that pays scant attending to the materiality of media, the existing studies of the Persian blogosphere usually limit their investigations to the content of blogs to learn about the identities that are supposedly mirrored in postings (Alavi, 2005; Alinejad, 2011; Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008a; Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010). Therefore, the materiality of the medium of blogging and its technological particularity are mostly overlooked, resulting in a view that favors content (and information) over material incarnation; a view that at best reduces blogs to exposed diaries that allow a window into the identities that otherwise had little possibility to be expressed. These studies thus fail to observe that bloggers' selves are not predetermined; that blogs are not simply containers like any other medium into which bloggers pour their already-made, fully constituted identities. Drawing on ethnographic evidence, I showed in this chapter that blogging as a technology of writing

is irreducible to both the content it helps communicate and also to other technologies of composing self-centering narratives. Studying technological media is anthropologically important, because if as anthropologists we are to understand what it means to be human, we need to broaden our perspective to include the not-exclusively-human and their hitherto unforeseen contribution to creation of human selves. To show the contribution of blogging to self-crafting, I used an approach in this chapter whereby predetermination (both in the form of already-made selves prior to writing and predestined selves fashioned through blogging) gives its place to anticipation, and explored the properties of blogging as a specific technology of inscription.

Finally, if we acknowledge the specific but not predetermined ways in which blogging (due to its materiality, properties, and capacities) affects the process of the creation of the user's self, the larger theoretical question begging an answer is whether a blog itself (or more generally, any other object, technological or otherwise) can be a "self." Drawing on his research among the Upper Amazonian Runa, Eduardo Kohn (2007) in an attempt to restore the selfhood of nonhumans calls for an anthropology of life where life is defined as a sign process. In this formulation, significance is not "the exclusive province of humans" (p. 5) because in addition to symbols, significance can involve other fundamental modes of reference not limited to humans (i.e., icons and indices). Given this expanded, Peircean classification of signs that take sign-process beyond humans, umwelts, or phenomenological worlds of entities with selves, can now actively interact with each other. To have a self here means to hold a viewpoint, a vantage point, that in turn makes unlike entities (e.g., dogs and humans) who nonetheless perceive themselves as persons commensurable. This way, we can make sense of why

different species are capable of “adopting the viewpoints of other kinds of beings” and of “inhabiting their different *umwelts*” (p. 7). This, moreover, makes “becoming” or “blurring ontological boundaries” possible (p. 7). Critiquing Latour who regards humans as only actors with selves, Kohn thus extends selfhood to nonhumans—but notably not to *all* nonhumans; only to *some* (p. 5). It is because not all nonhumans possess a soul (p. 8) which is required for transspecies intersubjectivity—a manifestation of which, informed by the work of German biologist Jakob von Uexküll, is materialized in spider’s web. Kohn (p. 9) writes that a spider’s web is fly-like because the spider penetrates the insect’s *umwelt* and becomes aware of it, basically because both are selves and possess souls.

Is soul then what separates two types of entities in collectives: 1) those whose activities and contributions are creative (let us call them, actor type I) and 2) those who just intervene in the interactions of the collective (actor type II)? Although in his Actor-Network Theory Latour uses these two types of actors interchangeably, he in other places (2004, p. 75) makes a distinction between the two whereby actor type I is simply called “actor” and actor type II is an “actant,” or an acting agent. The motivation for making this distinction and for using the term actant is “to rid the word [actor] of any trace of anthropomorphism” (2004, p. 75). In other words, although all entities, human and other-than-human, can be actants (that is, they can affect the processes they are a part of as they collect associations of other humans and nonhumans), they might not be actors (that is, they are not persons with viewpoints; they do not possess a soul and cannot make a difference by themselves alone).

Therefore, another way of posing the question of if blogs (or *things* in general) are selves interacting with other selves is to ask whether blogs are actors too (and not simply

actants). It is likewise to ask: Can blogs, similar to spiders becoming fly-like, take on the characteristics of their bloggers or other blogs with which they interact? Can blogs undergo the process of becoming? Can they metamorphose? That is, if, contrary to Latour's attempt to get rid of anthropomorphism, it is reasonable to hold that blogs (or other actants) also anthropomorphize (the prefix anthropo- here is only a placeholder and can be replaced by non-humans; my focus is on the suffix, -morphism). Similar to humans capable of becoming, can blogs, more than simply affecting their collectives, change their forms and take on forms of other entities?

It seems that for that to happen, the notion of the self or that of soul needs to be stretched so it could include blogs (and *things*, technological or otherwise, in general). The other possible approach is, alternatively, to disconnect the idea of soul from all actants and actors and instead situate it in the *place* between them all—the place where it truly belongs—and to argue that neither humans nor things possess souls and are not *already* selves. What if the soul, the source of all selfhood and becoming, is placed not in any individual body, but somewhere in the extended body which is the assembly of humans and nonhumans; in the productive in-between (McLean, 2013, p. 60)? What if neither Stallybrass's coat nor the person who wears it possesses the soul, but it is placed in the wrinkles? What if the soul is placed in the lines of the chronological archive of Nazanin's blog? What if it is placed in the holes and gaps of the expectant system? What if it is in the folds of Sia's blog? In other words, what if we think of soul as placed in where actants and actors—humans or otherwise—simultaneously meet and separate (McLean, 2013, p. 59)?

The placement of the soul in the between is in line with Edward Casey's (2004) Aristotelian interpretation of the link between place and soul. In recounting the history of ideas regarding place and space, Casey shows how in Western thought place became displaced: how did we get from Archytas's *place is the first of things* to the post-Cartesian place as a universal, homogeneous, and isotropic medium (i.e., space) (Casey, 2004, p. 293). This brief history can by the same token be read as a history of how the soul was removed from its true location (i.e., place) and never reached *all* entities as to date only souls of *some* entities had the luck to be recovered. Casey in fact demonstrates that the displacement of place in Western thought ended in the disappearance of *things* since there cannot *be* a thing without place (p. 292). If things lost their soul when place was reduced to space, can attending to place not return to the things their soul? Casey identifies Aristotle as the first philosopher who took the bold step of "suggesting that the regionalization of things is due to the inherent power of place itself, that *place itself places*, engenders, effects, makes a difference by itself alone" (p. 294). He also shows that soul, "which is not moving but *self-moving* (as Plato said)" (p. 301) inhabits places, most importantly the in-between (or, Aristotle's middle: "between the extremities of up and down [...] a *tertium quid* in relation to them" (p. 297); or, Heidegger's *Ort*, "the gathering-place for mortals and gods as well as earth and sky" (cf. description of the Althing as a place of meeting in McLean, 2013 and look at footnote 94 for Heidegger's dwelling/building. The in-between is the only place to dwell)). Therefore, it is from the in-between, from what that makes the extended body possible, that the soul engenders the actants/actors of the collective. In other words, the between, unlike Locke's disgraced place, "a mere interval between pre-established points" (p. 292), produces as selves

“what is assumed to lie on either side of it” (McLean, 2013, p. 61) and gives them their souls. It is therefore the wrinkles that create both the coat and the person who wears it. The question of the self of the blog can thus be restated as that of the soul of the between: are the forceful lines of the blog’s chronological archive capable of making the open-ended becoming and co-evolution of Nazanin and her blog possible? Can the lines help Nazanin become blog-like and her blog become Nazanin-like? My observations of Nazanin’s blog and my understanding of her blogging can be summarized as follows: “The archive of Nazanin’s blog is both a physical extension of her blog[’s functionality] and an extremely precise presentation of her self—it fits it so well that it can quite literally capture her self.” But this quote is Kohn’s (2007, p. 9) explanation of Uexküll’s example of spider becoming fly-like—with a couple of substitutions where I replaced “a spider’s web” with “the archive of Nazanin’s blog,” “the spider” with “her blog,” and both “a fly” and “the insect” with “her self.”

If there is any merit to this argument, all sorts of intersubjectivities between unlike entities are possible, not because they all *already* have souls (nothing is predetermined), but because the place between entities creates and recreates them as selves and gives them their souls. It is due to the in-between’s ability to exert, as Aristotle puts it in *Physics*, a certain *dynamis*—power. It is important to understand medium first and foremost an in-between, a mediation. I will return to this point in chapter 6.

گوی منی و می‌دوی در چَوَگَانِ حُکْمِ من؛
در پی تو همی دَوَمِ گرچه که می‌دوانمت.

- مولانا

*You are my polo ball running in the curved mallet of my decree;
I am running in your track, although it seems I make you run.*

- Rumi

5

Chapter 5: In the Beginning Was the Word

5-1- INTRODUCTION

IN THIS CHAPTER I DISCUSS some ethnographic evidence from my fieldwork in the Persian blogosphere wherein specific ideas and thoughts—what one of my informants called the “topic” (*mozū*) of a blogpost—arise only as the result of writing—or more precisely, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, after digitally *doodling* words (*xatxatī-kardan*). I will show that the blogging interface makes this practice more easily available to bloggers. As a way into my ethnographic data, a number of anthropological,

philosophical, and media studies theories of writing, some synopses of the cultural history of Perso-Islamic mysticism, and fragments of Iran's literacy and literary traditions provide a line of communication throughout this chapter. Although the participants in this line of communication seem geographically distant, culturally distinct, and spread throughout the history of the country, the central notion of regimes of writing helps maintain the dialogue.

Webb Keane (1997a, 2007) has demonstrated that the dominant semiotic ideology imbuing the modern subject that is characterized by its effort to “act as the source of its own authority” (Keane, 2002, p. 74) requires thoughts to precede their material expression. In other words, in line with the dominant understanding of language as a conduit conveying content between a sender and a receiver (Reddy, 1993), the chronological hierarchy wherein thoughts and sensory experiences come before their material expression in writing is deeply entrenched within the modern constitution of subjectivity. This view therefore underscores the previously-contemplated immaterial meanings originated from within the individual at the expense of the materiality of semiotic forms that are supposed simply to represent those thoughts. As a result, it deems the reverse order (precedence of material expression of an unformed thought) to be an indication of insincerity on the subject's part. This view of language hinges upon the language ideologies—or “shared bodies of commonsense notions about the nature of language in the world” (Rumsey, 1990, p. 346)—that privilege the referential function of language (Silverstein, 1979, 1998) as they consider the idea to be already thought and the words, expressed in the form of written words, merely to refer to the pre-contemplated

thoughts without the former to be able to manipulate, add to, or subtract from the latter (Keane, 2002, p. 74).

Drawing upon Keane and following Rosaldo's (1982, p. 203) argument maintaining that the ways of thinking about language and human agency are linked, in this chapter I examine my ethnographic evidence to ask how it guides us to better understand (1) the relationship between the self, subjectivity, and agency on one hand and writing on the other; (2) the transformations in the relationship between the two; and (3) the moral implications of practices of writing that disagree with the assumptions of a dominant model dictating the relationship between the two.

Up to this chapter, I have argued that in a bidirectional manner one *is being written* at the same time one is writing (Chapter 3) by the very technological tool one uses to write—i.e., blogging, in my case (Chapter 4). In the ethnographic evidence presented in previous chapters, I have shown that my informants in their blogs engage in a self-creation procedure probably best characterized by a Foucauldian notion of subjectification. In this chapter, the same argument takes a radical turn as my focus on understanding the relation between the self and writing moves away from a process-oriented interpretation based on bloggers' intentions of bringing about certain changes to themselves towards what I call a non-intentional approach grounded in the latent power of words and their unforeseeable effects on individuals. I argue that a lack of an explicit plan, specific intention, prior contemplation, and knowledge on the individual's end characterize the latter in which power and agency mostly rests with written words, rendering the individual comparatively passive. My non-intentional approach to the relation between the self and writing avoids a sole emphasis on meaning and intention—

an approach that describes the process-oriented understanding I dealt with in previous chapters.

Borrowing the concept of “non-intentionality” from Laidlaw and Humphrey’s (2008, p. 277) ritual terminology developed out of their ethnography of the Jain rite of worship (Humphrey & Laidlaw, 1994), I will argue that the individual’s acts of writing in examples discussed in this chapter are “non-intentional”—in contrast to both intentional and unintentional. In other words, although these blogposts are not the result of an unintentional writing, as the bloggers are aware of what they do, the material expression of words on the computer display evokes some implications that in return non-intentionally determine the meaning of the written words—words that may have an actual effect on the blogger’s real life. Because of this non-intentionality, one could argue that the bloggers portrayed in this chapter in a sense “both are and are not the authors” (Laidlaw & Humphrey, 2008, p. 275) of their blogposts—and similarly of their fate, if those blogposts contribute to a real change in the bloggers’ lives. The written words materialized on the computer display are thus capable of causing changes and calling a new self into being.

As such, the latent powers of written words (Keane, 1997a, p. 687), a rather unrecognized effect in our dominant regime of writing, is at the heart of my argument in this chapter. By regimes of writing, I mean culturally available forms offered for expressions in writing and those that constrain such expressions. In this definition, regimes of writing characterize beliefs and feelings regarding language in its written form. They also indicate the possible relations of the writer and written words which may include moral interpretations of the writing self’s personality. Regimes of writing,

moreover, reveal internal connections between feelings and beliefs about written language and external connections between those beliefs and feelings and the larger cultural, social, and historical context. Later in this chapter, I discuss two major categories of historically available regimes of writing, the so-called modern and pre-modern regimes, in the context of Iran's literary and literacy culture and their shifts and popularity throughout the history. I, moreover, argue that people's blogging practices in the Persian blogosphere are at times inconsistent with the so-called dominant, modern regime of writing as they give precedence to the material expression of written words over immaterial thoughts and meaning. The precedence of the material expression observed in the bloggers' practices of writing, what usually associated with a pre-modern regime, is, however, masked by the modern regime of writing in Iran which has additionally become embedded in anthropological studies of the Persian blogosphere.

Finally, although I use the term "modern" to indicate the dominant beliefs about writing in contemporary Iran, the periodization of regimes of writing might be problematic as I will argue for the coexistence of both regimes throughout the history, and that moreover modern technologies of writing, including blogging, in fact provide people with practices of self-creation that are at odds with the so-called modern regime of writing. In other words, although characterized with precedence of thought and experience over material means of expression in writing and hence the dominance of meaning, our modern practices of writing in particular are not a stranger to a regime of writing that affords written words a force or power to alter the self. Our so-called modern regime of writing is therefore able to allow things that are usually reserved for a so-called pre-modern regime.

5-2- “THE TOPIC ITSELF COMES”

“You really don’t want to hear this,” said Nooshin and mirthlessly laughed. We were about to conclude our conversation for the night (or, for me, the morning, as Nooshin and I resided in time zones 10½ hours apart) when I asked “What do you want to write next in your blog? Do you already have an idea in mind?” I asked this question as a preface to a request that I had planned to bring up afterwards so I could set our next meeting’s agenda. I expected a quick affirmative response and a brief description of her next post and had planned to follow up my initial question by asking whether she would let me observe her while she writes the idea down and edits, publishes, and shares the write-up as a blogpost. However, her unexpected response and the brief conversation it triggered did not let me bring up my request as planned.

When she said I would not want to know if she had an idea in mind for her next blogpost, I surmised the worst and thought she might want to close her blog—something she had done a few times in the past (see Chapter 4). In addition to the anxiety caused by her unexpected response, I was doubly worried because I was running out of time. I had to go to my class shortly and did not have enough time to discuss what I imagined was her decision to close the blog. Trying not to display my nervousness, I asked why she thought I would not like to hear her answer. Nooshin responded in a more serious tone that because she wanted to be honest with me, but at the same time she did not want to disappoint me and embarrass herself by talking about her, in her own colloquial language, lousy (*zāye*) and inelegant method of blogging. I felt somewhat relieved since her explanation did not necessarily indicate that she wanted to discontinue her blog. But

she next discounted her blogging skills some more. Her tone and choice of words now gave me the impression that maybe she wanted to confess that she was plagiarizing and stealing her blogposts' ideas from others—a fairly common practice in the Persian blogosphere. But she then immediately said in a slow voice that maybe she was not the right person with whom I should work for my research. I now wondered if she was simply priming me to announce that she was opting out of my study. Thinking that it was one of those fieldwork tag-you-are-it moments when the informant politely puts the ethnographer in touch with a supposedly more knowledgeable and possibly elder person in the community to take the burden off herself, I inaudibly blamed myself: “You should have known better. She guessed you want to observe her writing. It was too soon to bring this request up.” To control the damage, I tried to assure Nooshin that her participation had been very helpful to my research: “I have read many blogs and honestly I do not see anything lousy about yours. You have been a great help.”

Fortunately, she sensed my anxiety and soon put me out of my worries by mentioning that she in fact was happy to help. But she quickly added that I was not aware of her behind-the-scenes practices of blogging and that I would also admit her blogging practices were lousy if I learned it often happened that she did not have a specific idea in mind, but she nonetheless wrote: “Sometimes I have a good idea; sometimes I don't. But when I don't have an idea, I still blog. Isn't it very lousy (*xeylī zāye nīst*)?” Surprised by her answer, I promised Nooshin that it, quite the opposite of what she thought, sounded very fascinating to me and I was in fact extremely interested to learn about and if possible observe her blog's 'backstage'. Apologizing that I must leave our conversation to run to my class, I hurriedly asked one last question so it would not sound as if I was abandoning

a conversation that I just described as fascinating. I asked what she wrote about, when she did not have an idea in mind. Nooshin responded that “it is hard to say, because the topic itself comes” (*mozū’ xodeš mīyād*).

Nooshin was not the only person who made such a statement during my fieldwork. However, she probably more than any other informant considered the practice of writing without a preplanned idea to be mortifying and discrediting. It does not mean though that other bloggers valued highly the blogposts produced through comparable practices. For other bloggers, although such blogposts were not necessarily mortifying and disqualifying, they were considered to be playful rather than serious pieces which did not deserve one’s full attention. When bloggers did not know what to write, but wanted to write something nonetheless, they casually *played* with their keyboards and did some trials and errors until an idea developed. “It is like doodling (*xatxatī kardan*),” said a long-time blogger and added “it is why there are so many blogs whose names include ‘doodles’ (*xatxatī-hā*)”—e.g., The Doodles of a Manic Boy (*xatxatī-hā-ye yek pesar-e ravāni*), The Doodles of a Young Seminary Student (*xatxatī-hā-ye yek talabe-ye javān*), and The Doodles of a Menstrual Mind (*xatxatī-hā-ye yek perīyod-e maqzī*), to name a few. Another blogger whose blog’s name in truth included the word “doodles,” said that all she was doing when blogging was essentially doodle. She characterized her blogposts as such to draw a distinction between the well-contemplated and serious pieces she wrote as a journalist and her “for-no-reason” (*haminjūrī*) blogposts. It is worth noting, in passing, that the Iranian bloggers’ use of a drawing-related term (i.e., doodling, whose Persian translation includes the word for line) for describing their practice of writing in the Persian blogosphere hints at an understanding of writing that is not fully separable

from drawing (Gray, 1971; cited in Ingold (2007:129))—an understanding that highlights the significance of the materiality of writing as it holds that written meaningful words, first and foremost, are formed by material, *meaningless* lines. This is to say that, following Heidegger (1971a, 1977), the meaningful written words are the disclosed ‘world’ brought forth out from the ‘earthly’ material lines, in an act of *poiesis*.

Playful and unserious, doodles are not usually based on previously-contemplated ideas and take form as they are being scribbled. In other words, the meaning and purpose of what one doodles or, in Nooshin’s words, the topic (*mozū*), if any, usually follows its material expression. Contrary to one’s commonsense expectation of a topic as directive and intentional, it sometimes non-intentionally comes after the fact of its writing. More importantly, it seems that a deviation from this commonsense expectation in practice is at the root of Nooshin’s embarrassment at confessing to the absence of a previously-thought topic in a number of her blogposts. It also explains other bloggers’ descriptions of blogposts produced comparably that suggest a lack of seriousness when in fact their *doodles* sometimes, as I will show in this chapter, have real-life ramifications. The way these blogposts were valued illustrates the dominance of this commonsense view of written language and the moral implications of when one’s use of writing disagreed with the expectations of this view.

Sincerity is an account of a certain relationship between one’s words and interiority (Trilling, 1972). In the dominant commonsense view of writing, the precedence of the material expression of words—i.e., the physical appearance of the written words on one’s computer display—over the immaterial thoughts and meaning that are supposed to initiate from one’s interiority and be represented by the exterior

words indicates insincerity (Keane, 1997a). Therefore, when the words do not reflect what the writer mean or intend, since as I shortly show there is no specific intention before writing these blogposts, the individual's writing is thought to be insincere. Also, in this view the notions of intention and meaning are closely connected as intentionality is defined as the ability of the mind of a thinking and perceiving subject to be about something (Duranti, 1999, p. 134). Meaning is, therefore, the result of an act of intentionality and is placed in the individual's heart and mind, the seats of all feelings and thoughts.

Sizing up her practice of blogging against that of others in the blogosphere who in her mind supposedly were following the conventions of the dominant regime of writing and accordingly that of intentionality and sincerity, Nooshin felt embarrassed to expose her insincerity and lack of intentionality to me. In fact, that she wanted to refer me to other bloggers for my research shows that Nooshin thought others in the Persian blogosphere blog in accordance with the conventions of the commonsense view of writing in which people write to make their minds and hearts (in its non-anatomical sense) present to others. Nooshin, however, did not have any certain ideas in mind prior to writing and as a result used writing, as I will show shortly, not to refer to some pre-existing thoughts but to create them. In other words, the blogposts like those of hers in which the thought or topic trails after its expression in written words are, according to the dominant regime of writing, insincere, and hence a source of embarrassment—if not, for example in the case of other bloggers discussed above, it is because they were deliberately and playfully “insincere,” and as such were exempted from the dominant discourse of sincerity.

Particularly in the Persian blogosphere, a departure from this regime of writing was effortlessly construed as insincerity, for blogs were largely considered to simply reflect in writing an already-experienced episode in the blogger's life, his or her inner states, or his or her previously-thought ideas—rather than allowing typed words to *fabricate* one for them. As I discussed in the introductory chapter, this dominant view is embedded in a majority of existing studies of the Persian blogosphere that scrutinize blogposts as a reflection of the bloggers' inner states, “as product but not as production” (Roseberry, 1982, pp. 1023-1024). Also, although the Iranian bloggers' practices of writing and their understandings of those practices contradicted this view, it was predominantly acknowledged as the dominant view in the Persian blogosphere itself where a considerable stress was placed on other bloggers' inner states, and consequently, their intention. Taking other bloggers' words by default as sincere, people in the Persian blogosphere were deeply engaged in a process of mindreading (Lillard, 1998) and interpreting other bloggers' intentions via their written words.

Nooshin's reluctance to discuss and expose her blogging habits in spite of the fact that her practice of blogging was a common method of writing in the Persian blogosphere indicates that the commonsense view of the relationship between thought and writing is capable of silencing (if not repressing) practices that do not agree with it. The expression she used to describe her way of blogging, *zāye*, when used as slang, implies an extreme unpopularity and an embarrassing nonconformity to the culturally accepted standards of a given community. It is usually used when one is singled out because of one's stupidity. As such, Nooshin was uncomfortable to expose her seemingly unpopular and perhaps foolish practice of blogging whose final product could be insincerely pretended to be

following the dominant view of writing in the Persian blogosphere—a view that considered the blogpost to be the mere reflection of a previously contemplated thought.

The relation between writing, thoughts, and consequently the inner self is usually thought as a relation of reflection. This view historically applied not only to the content of the writing but also to the form and appearance, including handwriting. Almost a century ago, Baughan (1919) wrote that “many great thinkers have acknowledged that the handwriting reflects [...] the intelligence and character of the writer” (p. 1) and this is evident from the fact that handwriting “alters and develops with the intelligence—that it becomes firm when the character strengthens, weak and feeble when the person who writes is ill, or agitated and erratic when he is under the influence of joy, grief or any other passion” (p. 2). As such, there is a tendency to suppose that any piece of writing, both through content and form, willingly or otherwise reveals something deep about the writer’s interiority, character, and personality. Adhering to this belief, Nooshin was worried that her practice of blogging would lay bare a literal “lack of character”—an absence of thought that could be consequently reflected in her writing. She, in other words, thought that discussing her writing process would reveal the secret that the final product—i.e., her blogposts—could perfectly keep: that they did not reflect or represent any previously contemplated thoughts or ideas.

In a later conversation with Nooshin, I brought up the request I was not able to ask that morning. After she agreed to my request, late one night in November 2014, through Skype’s ‘Share Screen’ function, I observed Nooshin’s practice of writing a blogpost without having a preplanned idea. She started what fifteen minutes later turned into a blogpost with simply typing the word “bread” (*nān*) in the first line of the editor

window of her blog’s content management software. She then cut the word out using the keyboard shortcuts and pasted it in the “Post Title” box whose content appears as the *topic* of the published blogpost. She however changed the title after proof-reading the post and before hitting the “Publish” button.

Once she published her blogpost, I asked why she chose this specific, and as we shortly see, culturally potent word (“*nān*”) to which she answered because “it is one of the first words that strikes your mind when it is totally empty.” In other words, she did not essentially choose the word; the word itself emerged in her mind. Interestingly, in the now-retired pedagogical method by which I and most of my informants learned to write back in first grade, along with some other words like “water” (*āb*), “father” (*bābā*) and the third-person past form of the verb “to give” (*dād*), “bread” (*nān*) was one of the very first words that children were taught to write—simply because these short words are very easy to spell and comprise simple repeating letters making them good pedagogical tools. Then as they compiled these words into unsophisticated sentences that make only a little sense (like, Father gave bread: *bābā nān dād*¹⁰³), children learned some of the most frequently-used letters of the Persian alphabet. Although literacy education in Iran has recently shifted towards a more meaning-centered method wherein pupils are given more extensive and meaningful texts to subsequently recognize alphabet letters in a reverse (i.e., meaningful texts to meaningless letters) process, the old method through which my

¹⁰³ No longer part of the literacy education in Iran, these sentences were also criticized for the patriarchal gender roles they instilled in the minds of the new learners.

informants were initially introduced into literacy seemed not to so much care about meaning.¹⁰⁴

This pattern of creating larger linguistic units out of smaller ones,¹⁰⁵ reminiscent of the literacy education of my informants, is observable in Nooshin's practice of blogging. Like a new learner who puts together the few letters and then words she can spell to create some sort of a meaning about which she did not know before writing, Nooshin retyped the word "bread" (the word that she had removed from the body section of the editor and pasted in the title box) and added other words to it to create a sentence. She typed, deleted, and un-deleted a few more half- and full sentences. The sentences sounded like clichés with ready-made meanings not fully of her own making implying predictable moral messages: "In the past bread always used to be on our table (*sofre*) regardless of the type of food we ate;" "Bread is the table's blessing (*barkat-e sofr*);" "People no longer kiss and put at a corner [away from the well-trodden path] the pieces of bread they find left on the street;" "Afghans still call any type of food 'bread;'" and "Taking out the half-baked dough (*xamīr*) from the inside of the bread is what we do first before eating it." (figure 4.1) She deleted all sentences and kept the latter after restoring it

¹⁰⁴ This change in literacy education method and the dominance of content and meaning in the current method might be responsible for the decline of students' writing skills in Iranian schools. A recent study among high school students in Tehran shows a growth in students' oral skills especially those that are related to the oral development of ideas while the same study demonstrates that students' writing skills have declined. One of the researchers describes the findings of the study as a process of "oralification" (*šafāhī-šodan*) of Iranian students (Daneshgar, 2015, p. 1).

¹⁰⁵ To be precise, the Iranian students' literacy education used to begin with non-linguistic units—i.e., lines—that were copied by pupils from a model in a practice called "*lohe-nevīsī*." Lohe (tablet) was a small wooden board students used to practice writing in pre-modern Quranic elementary schools (*maktab-xāne*, literally, writing house). This educational method where writing was thought to be a form of and develop out of drawing lines, similar to the use of *doodling*, a drawing-related word to describe a practice of writing, is in line with Ingold's (2007) description of writing prior to the seventeenth century when it was identical to drawing.

(undoing the delete action). The moral message of this sentence, although guessable, was not as clear to me as the other ones.

After producing, deleting, and moving around a few more sentences inspired by the implied meaning of the first sentence, she added that although the half-baked dough is delicious and it is why children love it, parents advise against eating it, lest it gives the children stomachache. She then linked this observation to the activities she had started but did not finish (including learning French on her own and learning to play *setār* (a string instrument) with an instructor and concluded that

Although delicious (*xoš-mazze*), they are not good for my health. It is not good for me to go to private music sessions once in a while without enough practice. I've learned very little. I must decide to either carry those half-done (*nesfe nīme*) projects through or forget about them altogether and instead spend my time and money on more useful things important to me.

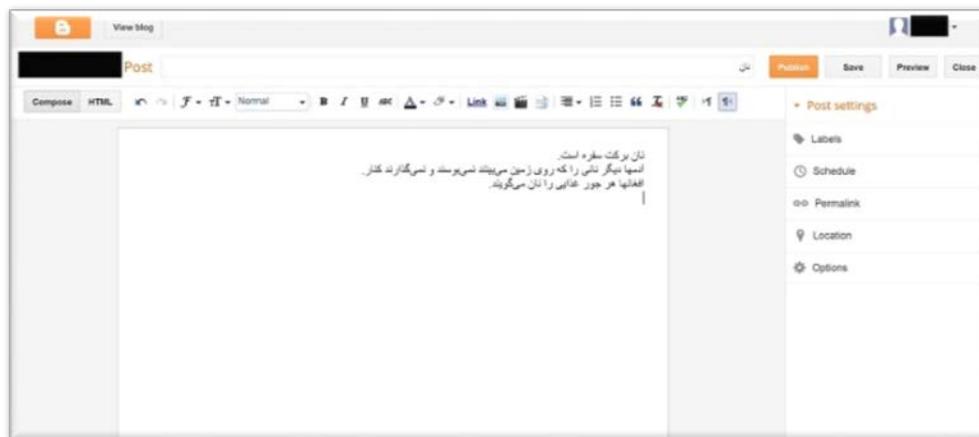


Figure 5.1 A Screenshot of Nooshin's Blog's Editor Window while Blogging

She finished the blogpost by giving herself a deadline until her upcoming birthday almost a month away to either take those projects seriously or “act like an adult and throw away the dough and instead eat the bread.” Nooshin ended up giving up her self-

instructed French lessons because she did not pick them up the way she wanted by the deadline, but dedicated enough time to her *setār* practices and has since been meeting with her instructor routinely.

Although before writing the blogpost she had occasionally thought about concentrating on her half-done projects more seriously, Nooshin had never considered divesting herself of them. More importantly, she did not have any decisive plan for them whatsoever. She also did not remember to think about these personal projects immediately before she wrote the blogpost and even “for weeks if not months before that;” but she is happy that she “finally did something about them.”

Did the written form of the noun “bread” on the computer screen which was probably inscribed in her mind at an early age when she learned how to write for the very first time alter Nooshin’s life—even if in an insignificant way? Is not it then true that the written form of the word lent her “an adoptive place to speak from” (Pandolfo, 1997, p. 29) and summoned sentences not fully of Nooshin’s own making with culturally predictable messages? Even beyond that, is what she thought not determined “by facts external to, and perhaps even unknown” (Glock, 2001, p. 112) to her? Is not it the case that one of those sentences consequently altered something in Nooshin’s life? Is Nooshin’s new understanding of herself not dependent on an external, material cognition to some extent already thought for her? In other words, is not it true that an *inscription* of a word initiated by an external source that summons culturally recognizable meanings in a mnemonic process resulted in Nooshin’s *description* of her life—“a more or less coherent representation” (Clifford, 1990, p. 51) of the reality of her life? How did the fact that the change was externally initiated by “a language [s]he did not invent” (Mauss,

2003, p. 33) and not from *within* Nooshin, from her heart, the putative locus of the self (Keane, 1997b, p. 4) contribute to her embarrassment at declaring the lack of a topic prior to writing it? Does the emergence of meaning after the fact without a prior intention for the creation of that specific meaning make Nooshin's blogpost insincere in the eyes of others in the Persian blogosphere—the eyes of those who supposedly adhere to the dominant, modern regime of writing?

In his ethnography of the Urapmin people of Papua New Guinea, Robbins (2004) writes that “Urapmin take it as obvious that one cannot see into another person's heart” (p. 139). As such, behaviors are essentially unpredictable because one's words are no indication of his or her actions. In other words, for Urapmin behaviors are unpredictable because words are not thought to be sincere by default. As such, by listening to one's speech, “they cannot have conclusive knowledge of what is in another's heart” (p. 139). By contrast, in the Persian blogosphere, people assume by default that words originate from the heart and reflect what is already in it as the heart is the seat for deepest thoughts, feelings, and intentions. However, for them, similar to Urapmin, behaviors can be equally unforeseeable, because in spite of the commonsense view, meaning in practice can be formed non-intentionally—or to borrow De Landa's (2006) concept and use it in a different context, meaning can be an “unintended consequence of intentional action” (p. 24).

Similar to Nooshin's practice of digital doodling with words in her blog with the hope of creating a meaningful blogpost at the end, one informant told me that he sometimes started to write not with a topic in mind but with a new idiom, adage, or aesthetically pleasant word that he had recently heard of or read. Another blogger

mentioned that it brought him to giggle every time when people commented on how well-thought his essentially little-thought posts were. He said that he was being judged on thoughts over which he initially did not feel any ownership. It was only, in other words, when other bloggers attributed intention to his words that he became responsible for them. Another informant wrote to me that she thought that a practice similar to what Nooshin did was ridiculous because it sounded “like buying a car because you happen to have a spare wheel.” In all these examples, the so-called modern regime of writing upon which Iranian bloggers’ view of writing is based is violated by the very blogging practices of the same bloggers. The mismatch between the dominant regime of writing that does not recognize written words’ precedence and their power in changing selves on one hand and the actual writing practices of bloggers for whom words are powerful enough to cause real changes on the other hand creates a feeling of insincerity, lacking, or unserious-ness in the bloggers.

5-3- REGIMES OF WRITING IN THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF IRAN’S CULTURE

Before moving to my next ethnographic example, two points need to be made to situate the discussion of regimes of writing in the historical context of Iran’s literary and literacy cultures that have to date affected people’s view of language, its essence, and function in general and that of writing in particular. In section 5-3-1, I will introduce two regimes of writing that have existed concurrently throughout the literacy and literary history of the country. While one regime of writing maintains that thoughts must come before their material expression, the other supports the idea that thoughts may appear as an effect of

material expression of ideas. In section 5-3-2, I will then show that although these two regimes have coexisted alongside one another for centuries, modernity in Iran is, among other things, characterized by the elevation of the former regime and condemnation of the latter.

5-3-1- The Latent Power of Written Words

First, the latent power of written words in shaping selves and changing fates is a fully known cultural category in Iran. Although largely considered a superstition, for many in Iran today the recognition of this power is a matter of everyday belief as observed in practices such as “writing prayers or prescriptions” (*do’ā-* or *nosxe-nevīsī*) (Mohammadi Doostdar, 2012). For those seeking prescribed prayers to solve specific problems, the prayers need to be specifically written down so they resonate “frequently enough [...to become] efficacious in materializing the specific prayer or wish” (p. 123). Words, if written, therefore are sometimes believed to have the ability to alter people’s innermost feelings and their fates. They are, among many other things, capable of growing fondness in an oblivious beloved, helping a husband lose his love for a co-wife, and soften an unkind employer’s heart.

The power of written words is also profoundly illustrated in the Perso-Islamic culture of mysticism. There is ample evidence in the history of Persian mystic literature that for some mystic figures, written words on their own could create spiritual experiences—experiences that for other mystics might require long periods of retreat and isolation. In general, the relation between the self and written words separates two groups of mystics and their spiritual experiences. For instance, while for a mystic like Ayn al-

Quzat Hamadani (1098-1131), the former jurist who was hanged and then skinned and burned at the age of 33, spiritual experiences and mystical thoughts and emotions went before their expression, for Ruzbihan Baqli (1128-1209), writing and written words preceded the mystical experience (Shafi'i Kadkani, 2013 [1392], p. 560). In this historical regime of writing, the written words, therefore, were thought of being equally capable of representing and creating a mystical experience. More importantly, the two apparently opposite chronological orders in the hierarchy of words on the one hand and thoughts and experiences on the other seemed to be perfectly acceptable as legitimate relations between the self and writing.

However, in the contemporary evaluation of mysticism, under the influence of the dominant contemporary regime of writing in Iran and in line with what Mitchell (1988) calls techniques of enframing, the latter (creation of a spiritual experience as an after-effect of writing) is negatively labeled as “urban mysticism” (Shafi'i Kadkani, 2013 [1392], p. 358), in which real mystical experiences beautifully represented in allegories are replaced by complex metaphors seeking to create an unoriginal feeling. This negative appraisal also puts the so-called urban mysticism in charge of the decline of genuine mystical experiences. In this view, while the true mystics are seen as not restricted by the language used to represent their experiences, the questionable mystical figures are thought of as individuals who use certain complex but known linguistic/metaphoric patterns (*este'āre-ye jadvalī*) (2013 [1392], p. 361) to juxtapose words that in return create deceptively meaningful experiences for them. Although the latter group might be considered to be masters of words due to their ability to *play* with words, their verbal

skills are ironically not absolute; because the words ultimately affect the mystics and their spiritual state.

In mysticism and social movements that emerged out of mystical thought in Iran, the belief in the latent power of words is probably actualized more than any other places in the Horufi (literally, Alphabetism) teaching, a doctrine developed by Fazl-Allah Astarabadi (d. 1394). Astarabadi, known to his followers by many exalted titles, including Fazl-e Yazdān (the generosity of God), in a revelatory experience (*zohūr-e kebrīyā* “the manifestation of glory”) in the city of Tabriz in 1374 learned about the power of each of the thirty-two Perso-Arabic letters. The knowledge of the latent power of the thirty-two letters and consequently any conceivable word formed by those letters awarded Astarabadi the statuses of both “Jesus returned to the manifest plane and the promised Mahdi from the lineage of the Prophet” (Algar, 2004, p. 485). Following the testimony of the Quran regarding Jesus, Astarabadi was seen in the eyes of his followers as the “final and comprehensive word of God” (Algar, 2004, p. 485)—a *word* represented in the body of Mahdi imbued by all the powers buried in the thirty-two Perso-Arabic letters and the numbers associated with each letter.

The power of words is, however, not limited to the realm of mysticism. Shafī’i Kadkani (1998 [1377]), a prominent Iranian literary critic, coins the term “magic of juxtaposition” (*jādū-ye mojāverat*) to discuss the magical power that words hold on people’s fate. He suggests that there are many instances in Persian and Arabic speakers’ everyday use of language in which words when materially expressed summon or invite other words that together they create a meaning that although not at all intended by the speaker or author, it imposes its force on him or her. Upsetting many Muslim Quranic

scholars, decades before Shafi'i Kadkani, Jeffery (1938) in a failed attempt to give an etymological interpretation of a name in the Quran demonstrates the desire for juxtaposing rhyming words in the holy book of Islam itself. Jeffery argues that *Tālūt*, the name given to Saul in the Quran, is simply “a rhyming formation from طال [tall, from Arabic *tūl*, a physical trait of Saul consistent with the Biblical story] to parallel جالوت [*Jālūt*, Goliath].” He therefore concludes that because it seems that the name was formed merely as an effect of a rhyming juxtaposition with *Jālūt*, Mohammad most likely had not “heard or remembered [the name] correctly” (p. 204).

Noticing the penchant of the materially expressed words to summon each other, Shafi'i Kadkani maintains that sometimes the force of juxtaposed words that are only linked together because they rhyme or make a pun-like effect has changed Iranians' “social and historical fate” and their “system of social thought” (1998 [1377], pp. 17-19). At the level of the individual's fate, he, for example, writes that *Sahib ibn Abbad* (died 995), the Iranian grand vizier of the Buyid dynasty, once wrote a short letter to one of his judges in the city of Qom and dismissed him without originally intending to do so. The very short, telegraphic letter simply reads in Arabic “*ayyohal qāzī be Qom! qad azalnāka fa-qom.*” (Hey the judge in Qom, I just dismissed you, so get up.) It is reported that when the judge saw the dismissal notice, he said “I have done nothing wrong. My fate was determined by the rhyme between *Qom* [the name of the city where he was serving] and *fa-qom* [so get up]” (Shafi'i Kadkani, 1998 [1377], p. 19). It is believed that before writing the letter, the vizier did not intend to discharge the judge. The letter he started was meant to convey another official message. But when he addressed the judge by writing “Hey the judge in Qom!” the last word in the letter's title, the name of the city,

Qom, when materialized on the paper summoned the other word (*fa-qom*) used to dismiss subordinates. The Iranian vizier known for his interest in Arabic and obsession with rhyming words could not resist the perfect juxtaposition of the two words, decided to act on what the words led him, and discharged a guiltless judge.

Moreover, when it comes to literacy and writing proficiency education in Iran, the current regime of writing that imbues the teachings of the official Writing Skills school books clearly favors the representational function of language. During my fieldwork, I closely examined the official Writing Skills school books that Iranian students study in grades seven and eight. The books are fairly new as they have been written and revised during the past few years after the educational system in Iran underwent a radical change restructuring it into a new three-level system. After the change, education in Iran is divided into a six-year elementary school and two three-year-long high school cycles. The new system, among many other things, required new books. These new books are designed and written by a group of authors appointed by the Ministry of Education which is in charge of the centralized K-12 education.

After closely examining the school books, in order to be able to interact with creative writing teachers and also to better understand the current dominant regime of writing in Iran perpetuated in school books, I became engaged in authoring two supplementary writing skills books for students enrolled at schools affiliated with Iran's National Organization for Development of Exceptional Talents, a highly selective school system that accepts a limited number of straight-A students who rank high in an annual entrance exam. The supplementary books are meant to enhance the official educational books for the students in these schools. To prepare the books, in addition to closely

examining the official books, I also talked to and corresponded with the Ministry of Education's authors and a group of experienced Persian literature and creative writing teachers in Iran.

The authors of the eighth grade book, in their introduction to the book which addresses teachers using the book emphasize the significant role of the writing plan and describe the act of writing as a form of engineering: "Students and writers, before writing about any given subject, must plan a map [of their writing] in their minds. They should predict all the steps and sections and write them down on paper. Teachers in their lessons must then highlight the planning and engineering procedure of writing and ask students to present their mental maps and the steps they plan to take for writing" (Akbari-Sheldareh, Dehrizi, & Najafi-Pazoki, 2015, p. 8).

Similarly, in the seventh grade Writing Skills book, the metaphor used to describe writing is a *journey* that starts from the mind and ends on the paper (Akbari-Sheldareh, Najafi-Pazoki, & Dehrizi, 2014, p. 15) (figure 4.2). Moreover, in a lesson titled "Let's Write Down Our Thoughts and Speeches," the authors of the eighth grade book assert that writing is simply "the inscription of thoughts" and highlight the significance of the sameness of the self and writing by advising students that we should write "like ourselves" (*mesl-e xodemān*) and denouncing any external influence on writing one's mind (Akbari-Sheldareh et al., 2015, p. 27).

In the supplementary books I prepared whose content upset the group of authors in charge of the Writing Skills school books at the Ministry of Education, I reversed the process of writing as described in the official books through exercises and activities that focus on unforeseeability of the writing *journey*—a journey that in its revered form *starts*

with putting down the pen on the paper; an unplanned journey in which each step is determined by the previous one; a journey whose destination is unknown.¹⁰⁶ The evaluators of the supplementary books at the Ministry of Education voiced their dissatisfaction with and objection to my method in a letter to a deciding manager by saying that the lessons in my proposed books “move in the opposite direction of the official educational plans.” Therefore, while the Ministry-of-Education-commissioned authors’ view standing in for the dominant regime of writing limits the power of words to representation of preexisting things (Barad, 2003, p. 802), the view inspired by bloggers’ writing practices that I developed in the supplementary books locates the power of words in their materiality—in what that exceeds meaning, but is capable of creating meaning.

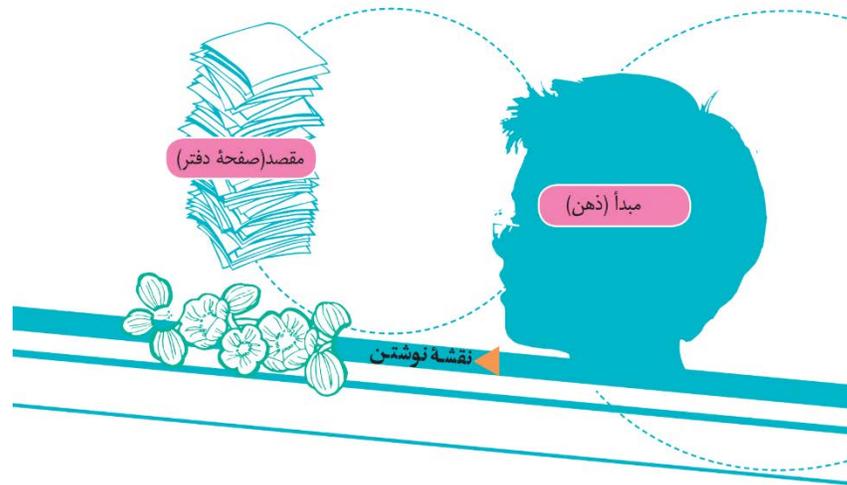


Figure 5.2 The diagram depicting “The Map of Writing,” with the mind as the starting point and the page inside the notebook as the destination (Akbari-Sheldareh et al., 2014, p. 15).

¹⁰⁶ The writing activities include, among many others, producing sentences in which each word starts with the last letter of the previous word and writing a paragraph with a collection of words that first come to mind when students hear the word spoken by a class colleague, etc.

5-3-2- Periodization of Regimes of Writing

The second point that helps situate our understanding of regimes of writing in their historical context is that the tendency to divide the regimes of writing into pre-modern (that recognizes the above-mentioned power of words and acknowledges the precedence of words in creating meaning) and modern (that rejects this power, favors pre-contemplated plans, and thinks of the precedence of words as insincerity) periods is usually associated with the periodization of Persian poetry marked by the advent of the New (or Nimaic) Poetry Revolution (*enqelāb-e še'r-e nīmayī* or *še'r-e no*) in the early 20th century which continued with the free verse movement of White Poetry (*še'r-e sepīd*) in which the poet does not use consistent metrical patterns and rhymes. Nima Yushij, the poet primarily associated with the New Poetry movement, is usually thought of as a modernist intellectual “responsible for constituting the Iranian subject in modernity” (Dabashi & Dahdel, 2003, p. 53). Although there is a long history of experimentation with *arūz*, the metrical system used in Persian and Arabic poetry, New and later White Poetry, in addition to reforming the common contents of Iranian poetry, are known to free the traditional (*kohan*) poetry from the limits of compulsory rhythm and rhyme and allowed the poet’s thought to decide about the words and the length of the hemistich and verse rather than delegating the decision to the rhyme and the conventional, consistent meters of the traditional Persian poetry.

Like many other modern movements seeking to emancipate subjects from the limits of a tradition, the New Poetry revolution at times engaged in belittling the traditional form of poetry—or at least a subset of the form—as it considered the so-called

pre-modern poetry to be insincere because the meaning is determined by the external forces of rhyme and prosodic rhythm. For example, Mahdi Akhavan Sales (1929-1990), one of the best known contemporary Iranian poets whose own New poems are heavily influenced by the traditional Persian poetry of the Khorasan School, describes the traditional poetry as a cul-de-sac (Akhavan Sales, 1990 [1369], p. 7). He likens Nima's poetic experience to the free and unrestricted flight of a butterfly, while the traditional poetry is equated to the slow crawl of a worm (p. 38).

Although far from completely void of rhythm and rhyme, the New Poetry gave precedence to a fully intended meaning in line with the "natural order" of an art not restricted by formal limitations imposed on expression (p. 104). As the descriptor "New" itself indicates, this literary movement deliberately departed from a "pre-modern" (*kohan*, literally: ancient) regime of writing towards a "modern" regime that treated words as "tools of the poet's expression of his intended meaning, not the other way around" (p. 104).

Due to popularity of poetry in Iran, the way the New Poetry movement defined language's function helped shape the now dominant regime of writing in Iran. Also, because of the New Poetry's association with modernity, the regime of writing it fostered is considered to be modern. However, as I have shown and will show in this chapter my informants' practices of writing are not always in line with the so-called dominant regime of writing. Also, the similarities one can find between the bloggers' practices of writing with those associated with a pre-modern regime of writing (including but not limited to using drawing-related terms to describe writing which points to the significance of the

materiality of writing in the Persian blogosphere) indicate a co-existence of regimes of writing in practice instead of a radical split that the dominant regime of writing promotes.

5-4- “BETRAYERS LEARN FROM BOOKS HOW TO CHEAT ON THEIR WIVES”

Among bloggers with whom I worked during my fieldwork, Kaveh’s practice of blogging more than that of any other informant helped me question the consistency of regimes of writing as well as observe the power that words exert over writing subjects. I became interested in Kaveh’s blog in 2005, a few months after he started his blog and a few years before I began researching the Persian blogosphere. He, 25 at the time, had grown up in a working class family in a small city in the East Azerbaijan province and was finishing medical school at a prestigious university in Tehran. The extremely entertaining stories revolving around his romantic relation with the girl he later married made me personally interested in Kaveh’s blog back in 2005. I was his age and read his blog as a wonderfully written romantic-comedy in which love overcomes any difficulties, no matter how challenging they seem. His career as a medical student and later a physician received only a meager attention in his blog, the title of which, unlike those of many other blogger-doctors, did not point to his career. His career was simply the backdrop of his daily experiences and not the exclusive focus of his posts. It may explain why his blog has not been, to date, listed on *Medlog: The Blogging Doctors Club* (2015), a collective blog written by seven Iranian doctors in whose right-side column appears a list (albeit, non-comprehensive) of the links to blogs written by doctors and medical students. The blogging community of doctors perhaps did not identify Kaveh’s blog with his career or

for the reasons I will write about shortly did not want to be identified with a blog such as his.

His career however played an indirect yet significant role in his blog. A few years later, when I started my fieldwork and got in touch with Kaveh in the capacity of an ethnographer, I learned that before blogging, for a couple of years, he had tried his hands at writing short pieces in a personal journal whenever his “night internship shifts were not incredibly grueling.” In such nights, he wrote in an email to me,

I could not really sleep, because I might have been called for any minute now. I also could not study—which I was supposed to do—because I was too exhausted to even think about it. I had to do something, though. Some of my colleagues used every single minute of their time to get ready for the residency exam. Some of them made best out of their time and took short naps. Others read novels or solved Sudoku puzzles. I chose to start a journal. I think writing felt natural to me. After all, most of my time as an intern then and as a doctor now has been spent on writing, documenting, and telling stories. Writing prescriptions, orders, medical histories, progress notes, and presenting cases in grand rounds [are what I have done]. To be honest with you, I liked what I wrote in my journal a lot. Sometimes, I was looking forward to a break so I could write something. Later, I thought others may like them too. I started my blog.

To compliment his writing and in line with the culturally appropriate politeness norms of *taarof* in such a situation, I replied by writing if he has ever thought of becoming a novelist—especially given the several-century trend of Iranian physicians turning into famous literary writers, from Borzuya, the physician in the late Sassanid era (5th and 6th centuries) who translated the Indian Panchatantra into Pahlavi, to Gholam-Hossein Sa’edi (1936-1985) who was trained as a psychiatrist but is surely better known as a prolific novelist and playwright. In response to my question, after acknowledging my *ta’arof* with more *ta’arof* that his writings are not up to the standards of anything publishable, Kaveh wrote that the nature of his job and the burden of the night shifts

when he was an intern did not let him sit and write longer pieces, let alone novels, and later when he had more time to spare, he was too used to writing shorter pieces to try any other format. In other words, his career and its limitations on his time, in an unexpected way, trained Kaveh to be a writer of shorter pieces. Unlike another group of bloggers who become writers for the first time when they start their blogs, Kaveh was already a writer when he began to blog. His writing habits and style formed before he started his blog and only found a suitable home there.

In his blog, Kaveh, as it is common with other bloggers, wrote in first person—from the “I” point of view. In the posts of the first several months, he wrote about the hurdles of finding someone who can use his or her influence so he would be assigned to a unit in Tehran, close to his girlfriend, for his mandatory military service, difficulties of finding a job after he graduated as a general medical doctor, and the obstacles before his marriage. He wrote about all these problems and challenges with a certain type of satire. In his posts, the problems all seemed easy, because his love could surmount any hurdle. Because of his carefree approach to the type of difficulties that would make anyone in his situation anxious, his stories sometimes sounded unreal and every now and then a reader commented in his blog that he or she cannot believe his stories. I myself sometimes considered his experiences to be simply the raw materials for his creative stories and thought that some of his stories were only loosely based on real-life experiences.

For example, to me, his extremely funny description of his plan with his future wife and their friends to win over the girl’s father’s consent sounded too adventurous and risky to be real. As it is customary, before he agreed to their marriage, the girl’s father wanted to research about Kaveh’s background and his family by talking with people who

knew him in different capacities. This group of people, of course, did not include Kaveh's friends who were young and ignorant of what makes a good husband and son-in-law. After talking with a couple of people who knew Kaveh, including his landlord, the father was deliberately directed by his daughter to a professor which had been supposedly working very closely with Kaveh and knew him better than anyone else. The so-called professor, part of the deceiving plan, was a friend of Kaveh who had put on professional make-up to look older. In his blog, Kaveh wrote in hilarious details how they found and asked a make-up artist to change the friend into a much older professor. The fake professor and the father met after-hours in the clinic where the friend was working at the time as a doctor's assistant. The meeting, whose details were described with suspense and ridicule in Kaveh's blog, was a huge success, because the extremely happy father had heard exactly what he wanted to hear as prior to the meeting the group of friends, including the girl herself, had carefully discussed and designed the points and messages delivered to the father. The meeting was apparently concluded with the fake professor saying "I would have immediately said yes, if Kaveh Jaan (dear Kaveh) had asked for my own daughter's hand in marriage. You should feel very lucky to find an educated, handsome, and most importantly innocent (*mazlūm*) guy like him who is truly in love with your daughter in a time that you can't even trust your own eyes."

The funny and optimistic blogposts continued after he landed a job as a physician at the National Iranian Oil Company's hospital immediately after his military training. At the hospital, among other things, Kaveh was responsible for conducting pre-recruitment medical examinations. The hospital became the setting for several of his blogposts

retelling the stories of incredibly hilarious encounters with the hopeful job candidates who themselves had many stories to share with Kaveh.

In 2009, when I conducted my first pre-fieldwork research, his blogposts started to sound more serious and lost the humor of the previous period. In his blog, he was not the light-hearted person I knew. However, to me as an outside observer, this shift did not sound strange, because of the post-2009 election's political uncertainty and public depression and also for personal reasons. Kaveh and his wife were expecting a child. Also, from his blogposts, it was clear that he did not get along very well with his in-laws. But, unable to raise kids on their own, Kaveh was also contemplating if he should accept his father-in-law's financial support to buy a small apartment in Tehran. In this period, Kaveh also did not blog as often as he used to do. In the past, he updated his blog on average with two to three new posts every week. But in 2009 he wrote no more than two posts a month. During the most of 2010 and 2011, he was silent in his blog, with offering no explanation to his readers.

In 2012, his new posts started to show up in my RSS feed reader. As a long time reader, I was happy to see he is blogging again. But his new posts were radically different in style and content from his previous writings. He now wrote in third person—a narrative point of view which is not common among bloggers. The content was also profoundly different to the extent that one could think the new posts were written by someone else. The romantic-comedy of the previous period had turned into an infidelity drama in the course of a makeover show whose process was kept hidden from the viewers' eyes. In this new period of blogging, most of Kaveh's posts were about a "he" cheating on his wife—a 'he' who was a married doctor, but slept with nurses, enumerated

the specialty of female doctors and residents with whom he had sexual relations, and fondly remembered his flirting and sexual relationships with younger women who accompanied their older relatives to the hospital (*hamrāh-e marīz*); a ‘he’ who had mistresses and did not care if his wife knew about them, because their child was the only reason keeping them in the marriage; a misogynistic ‘he’ for whom sexual relationship was the only purpose of being friends with women as ‘he’ thought women were not intelligent enough to partake in any lasting, serious relationship; a ‘he’ whose male unmarried buddies (*rofaqā*) surely came before the family. Kaveh referred to the ‘he’ in his posts with both the third-person pronoun “*ū*” which in Persian is gender-neutral and also “the man” (*marḍ*). The language of the posts also shifted to include “vulgar” words describing sexual organs and activities, almost present in all posts.

In a post, for instance, Kaveh wrote about how he seduced a young woman from a smaller city close to Tehran accompanying her father to the hospital to spend the night with him at a hotel. The post opened with this paragraph:

The man locked the hotel room’s door and asked the young woman to take off her *mānto* and *rūsarī* [the overcoat and headscarf respectively, together the most common form of hijab in Iran] and feel at home. She didn’t hesitate. She knew why they were there. Her boobs seemed larger under the tight *mānto*. But the *mānto* didn’t do justice to her waistline that gave her the perfect figure she had. He walked toward the woman and while taking off her t-shirt, told her: “You are so beautiful! You have a gorgeous body!” The man knew the girl for not more than half a day. They met that afternoon. After the woman’s father was admitted to the hospital, the man convinced her to spend the night in Tehran, instead of wasting two hours to travel back home and return again next day: “We will have a fun night together. I promise.” Maybe he knew the woman for only half a day, but he knew her type very well. She would enjoy fucking (*gāyīdan*) as much as he does.

The post continued with some details of their limited conversation and that they slept together one more time, before he never saw her again. In this new phase of blogging, especially when the content of his blog went beyond experiences of infidelity to include generalized gender-based judgments, he received many comments—both positive and negative. Negative comments ranged from accusations of serious ethical failures, to the breach of standards of work ethics, and to questioning his credibility as a doctor due to his misogynist ideas. Some readers also cast doubt on the truth of the stories. In a comment on the above-mentioned post, one wrote “it is impossible to get a hotel room if people of opposite sexes are not related.” A medical doctor also commented that she had witnessed many scandalous sexual relationships at hospitals where she had worked; but having sex with nurses inside hospitals, what Kaveh had written about in a post, sounded like a fantasy and not a real occurrence. The positive comments, on the other hand, in one way or another accused negative commenters of overthinking about consensual sex and generalizing their own experiences, or lack thereof, to question Kaveh’s experiences which were not unreal or even that scarce in the society today. Kaveh himself also responded to the negative comments in general terms. In his responses, he went back to the first person point of view. For example, in a line of reasoning he pursued in two of his responses to the ethical accusations, he wrote that: “I think if my wife knows about my affairs and still wants to be with me and if I do not care whether she is also engaged in an extramarital relationship, what I do is not unethical.” But at some point Kaveh decided not to respond to the comments, because, he wrote “I have already said what I had to say. I don’t want to repeat myself over and over again.”

When I started my fieldwork, Kaveh was one of the bloggers with whom I was eagerly looking forward to interacting. Like a soap opera fan, I had been for many years investing my time in following his successes, failures, disappearance, and return. Also, like a fan upset with the changes in his favorite show's story, I was still secretly hoping that the romantic-comedy of the first season triumphs over the more recent infidelity drama and was wishing for a fairy-tale-style happy-ending for the series' finale. But beyond my personal investment and hopes, I was also very much interested in knowing more about the shift in his narrative's point of view from first person to third person, which, although quite unique, was in my opinion telling of one of the reasons as to why people blog. As a reader, my assumption was that his new self-indulgent lifestyle was a bitter reaction to an unexpectedly unsuccessful marital commitment—something he never directly wrote about in his blog. As a researcher interested in blogging practices, I supplemented my personal hypothesis by adding that Kaveh's blog helped him come to terms with his new self—a self that was still a distanced “he,” a third person, not fully known to him.

My hypothesis however proved wrong, when almost 4 months into our correspondence, I realized, to my surprise, that according to Kaveh the third-person blogposts were neither based on nor inspired by his real-life experiences. My astonishment did not however stop there as I understood he in fact had extramarital sexual relationships. According to Kaveh, he indeed had slept with other people, including his coworkers and female relatives of his patients. But the stories describing the relationships preceded the real events.

In a conversation about the first time he cheated on his wife and in order to remember the date, Kaveh asked me to check for him the date of one of his blogposts. Because he used the Google-owned blog-publishing service, *Blogger*, the posts' dates appeared in the Western calendar format. He did a quick mental calculation and gave me an Iranian calendar date. I naturally assumed that he checked the date of the post which supposedly described his first extramarital relationship, because he wanted to remember the date which was naturally a day or two after the event if not the same day. But after our conversation, while sketching a timeline in my digital field notebook, so I can more quickly refer to the dates of his major life events in our future conversations, I realized that the Iranian and Western dates did not correspond. In our next conversation, which took place almost a month later due to his busy schedule, I asked Kaveh to clarify a couple of things that came up in our previous chat, including the dates' mismatch, in response to which he typed: "Are you one of the people who think those posts are real?" Flabbergasted at his answer that I could not tell if ironic as he used no smiles or several question marks accompanying exclamation marks—a written equivalent for an ironic tone, in my experience—I replied "I think so! Did you not say so yourself last time we chatted?" After a while it became clear that he had apparently misunderstood me when I told him that I want to study how blogging helped him in his life changes, the very first time I wrote to him to request an interview. He had taken it to mean that I knew his third-person blogposts were "practices" (*dast-garmī*, literally: warming one's hands) that helped him in changes he underwent.

Although only imaginary scenarios sometimes inspired by hospital rumors about other people, these inscribed practices in many cases were later mimicked by Kaveh in

his real life. Kaveh once wrote to me that in contrast to the famous song by *Ebi*, a celebrated Iranian pop singer living in exile whose music is very popular inside Iran, that says “No lover has learned from books how to love” (*hīč āšeqī āšeqī ro yād nagerfte az ketāb*), indeed “betrayers learn from books how to cheat on their wives.” However, the book by reading of which he learned to cheat on his wife was written by Kaveh himself. Extremely unhappy with his marriage, which is another story in itself, in his blog Kaveh objectified in words the opposite of the committed marital relationship he had found unsatisfying. These imaginary, thoroughly made-up scenarios described a make-believe person in situations less concerned with the meaning and values related to the notion of romantic love seen in his early years of blogging and more involved with baser instincts and body parts and sexual activities. Also, it is important that the blogposts were not the written outcomes of a profound knowledge. Being unhappy with his marriage was the only thing of which he was sure:

I knew that I don't want this crappy parody of a marriage. If it wasn't for my daughter, I wouldn't stay [in the marriage] even for one second; even if I was to be jailed because I couldn't afford the ridiculously high dower (*mehriye*). I'm still seriously thinking about getting divorce when my daughter turns seven and her mother can't have a custody claim. [...] But I did not deserve all this. Something somewhere went wrong. I was a happy person and deserved a happy life. That family [his in-laws] wasn't what I deserved.

He at the same time did not know if he wanted the self-indulgent lifestyle he later adapted. I asked Kaveh, if the change in his lifestyle was a way for him to revenge to which he answered: “I wasn't sure. I myself looked down on the people in the hospital whose scandals sometimes surfaced. I wasn't that kind of a person. I was taught to lower my look when talking with attractive women [lest I was tempted].”

Knowing only one thing—that he was not happy with his marriage—Kaveh started to write about an imaginary ‘he’ engaged in no-strings-attached sexual relations. As a result, he was able to imagine himself in “carefree, meaningless” sexual relationships without an intention to become “that kind of a person.” Although he did not hesitate to call his engagement in extramarital relationships a revenge, the revenge was not aimed at his wife or her family—it was a revenge against the life itself.

Kaveh wrote about the made-up situations and objectified them in words before he engaged in relationships similar to those described in his posts. It actually took him almost five months before he had his first extramarital sex: “I asked myself one day, why not. It looks fun on the computer display. It takes courage. But what I had to lose? Nothing.” He surely had something to lose: his reputation and his sense of himself as an honest man. But his blog helped him figure that out too. When responding or thinking about the readers’ negative comments he realized that he can live with what people might think about him: “Are there people who think what I do is unethical? [Yes. But] who cares when I think it’s not unethical and there are people who agree with me and they even don’t know what kind of a hell I live in at home?” Kaveh learned about all this through the comments in his blog. In his blogposts and by writing the imaginary situations and responding to accusations about the acts he had not yet committed, he was taught how to seduce other women, how to approach them, how to “fuck” them, how to forget about them, and how to think of all this as something not contradictory to his beliefs. When he engaged in his first extramarital relation he already knew “all the tricks, bits, and details” (*kalak-hā o xūrde kāri-hā*). Extramarital relations were simply the *actualization* of the *virtual* blogposts, drawn in one “master stroke executed all at once”

(Deleuze & Guattari, 1977, p. 217). Long before he actually cheated on his wife, the words in his blog knew about it and were awaiting the proper time to execute their knowledge. Kaveh himself did not know about what the words had planned for him. In fact, contrary to the so-called modern, dominant regime of writing that gives precedence to ideas and therefore knowledge over words, a lack of knowledge drives Kaveh's writings. Moreover, not only do words create a knowledge of Kaveh for himself, they also affect Kaveh's actions. For Kaveh, words are not simply a means to have an understanding of his self, but to mimic the situations they fabricate. The relation between the self and the written words here is not that of reflection, but mimicry and actualization.

Should we then not take into account words' *programs* (what they like and encourage their writer to pursue) for the writers that are being followed by the blogger? Critiquing "theoreticians of the performative or of pragmatics"—i.e., Austin (1962)—in *Telepathy*, Derrida (1988, p. 7) asks,

If there is something performative in a letter, how is it that it can produce all kinds of events, foreseeable and unforeseeable, and even including its addressee? All that, of course, according to a properly performative causality, if there is such a thing, and which is pure, not dependent on any other consequentiality extrinsic to the act of writing. I admit I'm not very sure what I mean by that; the unforeseeable should not be able to form part of a performative structure *stricto sensu*, and yet...

Both in the case of Nooshin and in that of Kaveh, non-intentional acts of writing whose outcomes were not based on knowledge of the self and did not aim at planned changes in the individual created unforeseeable effects. It is as if the blogposts' programs rather than the bloggers' intentions changed them. The blogposts let the bloggers encounter (in words) the persons they were not at the moment of writing the blogposts.

As such, following Derrida (1988, p. 5), one can argue that both Nooshin and Kaveh committed their lives, or at least an episode in their lives, to the programs of their blogposts—programs that do not seem like one, as unlike the typical programs, their effects are not known from the outset and their processes are not fully designed and planned. Nonetheless, the blogposts’ programs work as they indeed program their own writers: Nooshin and Kaveh became persons their own words’ programs wanted them to be. Drawing on Derrida’s notion of a writing’s—or more specifically, a letter’s—program, Miller (1991) gives an example of the recipient of a letter becoming the self the letter, as a piece of writing, invites him to be from Thomas Hardy’s (1964) famous novel, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, in which “poor Boldwood [...] becomes the bold lover Bathsheba’s valentine sees to tell him he is” (1991, p. 173). Likewise, Kaveh becomes the unfaithful person his blogposts invite and instruct and Nooshin follows the direction inspired by a random word. The word *nān*, for example, with its history in literacy education in Iran and also its “socially charged life” is, like other words, “populated with intentions,” as it is “half someone else’s” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293). However, contrary to Bakhtin’s *democratic* view of language in which a word “becomes one’s own only when the speaker populates it with his own intention” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293), in these instances the words’ *tyrannical* programs shaped the bloggers’ intention and in a sense made the bloggers their own.

The program of the written words, their penchant to get together with certain other words to create a meaning, knowledge, and understanding, and the power that they together exert in order to change one’s feelings, self, or fate are overlooked in the dominant, modern regime of writing. My ethnographic evidence shows that the relation

between the self and writing, in spite of what this regime of writing maintains and in fact with the help of modern technologies of writing, is of the same nature poetically described in the chapter's epigraph, the Rumi's verse: in the cases discussed in this chapter, although it seems that it is the bloggers who plan and write the blogposts, they simply follow the programs of their own blogposts—just like a polo player who runs in the track of the ball, in spite of the fact that it seems it is the polo player who makes the ball run.

5-5- CONCLUSION

In possibly his most famous short story, *East of Violet* (*Šarq-e Banafše*), Iranian novelist, Shahriar Mandanipour (1999) recounts a love story that takes place in Shiraz in the post Iran-Iraq war period when romantic relations were still deemed to be a sin that must be kept hidden from the eyes of the inquisitive public and interrogating moral police. Celebrated for its remarkable prose that bears the unmistakable marks of several illustrious Persian poets and prosaists, Mandanipour's highly intertextual story narrates the romantic pursuit of Zabih and Arghavan, two strangers, who fall in love with one another at the wrong time in history. The two primarily communicate through secret codes they place inside the borrowed books of the library housed inside the Hafeziyeh—a garden with both touristic and spiritual significance in the northern edges of Shiraz, where the tomb of Hafez, the fourteenth century legendary Persian poet, is located. Members of the Hafeziyeh library, Zabih and Arghavan convey their romantic messages by leaving small purple dots underneath the letters printed within the borrowed books,

ranging from *Leyli and Majnun*, a long love poem by the twelfth century Persian poet Nezami Ganjavi, to the Persian translation of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The narrator who might be the spirit of Hafez himself¹⁰⁷ gets to know the protagonists by putting the marked letters next to each other and deciphering the codes. The story's language alters to reflect the language of the books the two borrow.

East of Violet, a very well-known short story among the fans of Iran's contemporary fictional literature, is usually construed as a tale that brings the mystical love of the classic Persian literature—a love characterized by becoming one with the beloved—to the contemporary life of the readers, the purportedly undeserving progeny of the said classic poets, who know nothing about true love. The lovers in the story, although living in the late 1980s, in fact belong with the chapters of the twelfth century prose book, *Tazkirat al-Awliya*, or *Biographies of the Saints*. It is therefore not a coincidence that *Biographies of the Saints* is the last book the couple shares as it implies that the lovers' life (singular, as they are united in a death, the mystical *fanā*, that is much worthier than any imaginable life) must be understood in relation to those of famous Sufis and their miracles depicted in *Biographies of the Saints*—an indication that Zabih and Arghavan's love which like other true loves needs no cause and reason has nothing to do with the this-worldly and calculated present-day notions of love known to the readers of the story.

It however is not simply the different meanings of love in the two periods of time that are contrasted in the short story. The story also alludes to a shift in the regimes of

¹⁰⁷ He makes another appearance in Mandanipour's (2009) first English novel, *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*.

writing—a shift in the relations between the self and writing from material expression and mimicking to an emphasis on meaning and understanding. Contrary to us (i.e., the readers who primarily look for meaning of the short story as I already did in this section) the meaning of the words in the library books is at best secondary in the eyes of Arghavan and Zabih. All they care is the purple dots. They may not even read the books they borrow from the library, since for example Arghavan conveys in code: “I must have studied *the Conference of the Birds* for my exam; but all I saw were the marked letters inside the book. I understood nothing of the book itself” (p. 23). For the couple, the books are therefore stripped of meaning and dealt with in their mere materiality as they are first and foremost a constellation of meaningless printed letters underneath some of which they put the dots. Nevertheless, the dotted books affect Zabih and Arghavan as they become the hapless heroes of the borrowed books whose words are paradoxically emptied out and whose content, meaning, and story are bypassed. The story, for example, ends with the couple dying the well-known *death* of the Little Prince through whose book they have exchanged a message at one point in the story—the lovers are *sent home* by two snakes Zabih finds at his house earlier in the story and like in *The Little Prince*, the narrator is unable to find the bodies. In other words, the library books, are not in fact *read* for their meaning and content; but are unconsciously imitated by the lovers.

The common interpretation of the story is therefore not wrong in discerning that Zabih and Arghavan belong to a time and age different from, and in a nostalgic way better than, that of ours—the readers who are more or less their contemporaries. However, what this common understanding gets wrong is that this asynchrony is not simply a result of the different cultural meanings of love upon which the protagonists and

we, the readers, draw. It is instead a consequence of the fact that protagonists' relation with writing is different from our (i.e., the readers') relation with written words. Comfortably detached from it, *we* read *East of Violet*, or any other text, and analyze its discourse and cultural meaning, while Zabih and Arghavan's life is tied in with the library books whose effect is rooted in the materiality of the written words and whose heroes are unconsciously or otherwise mimicked by the couple. Whereas those particular books in the Hafeziyeh library in their material form with dots in them are the only copies important to Zabih and Arghavan and other copies of the same books are of no value to them, to *us* it does not matter which copy, print, or edition of the literary works Mandanipour uses to create his intertextual story as the content, the only thing required for us to decipher the short story, is similar in all prints and editions. Finally, while *our minds* seek the meaning behind Mandanipour's words, the printed letters inside the library books affect the protagonists' *bodies* and their very life and death.

Similarly, in one of his most representative pieces epitomizing the originality of thought in what later came to be known as the German media theory, Friedrich Kittler (2015) looks at a parallel shift in the relation between individuals and words by contrasting Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and the story of Francesca and Paolo in Dante's *Divina Comedia*, to conclude that whereas the Francesca and Paolo's "story speaks of bodies" and the power-effect of books on bodies, the Werther and Lotte's story, written some 450 years later, "speaks of souls" and the reader's incessant search for a meaning (p. 18). Following Lacan who writes "slightest alteration in the relation between man and the signifier [...] changes the whole course of history" (quoted in: Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy, 1992, p. 104), Kittler argues that the change in the relation with

written words illustrated in the contrast between Dante and Goethe, represents a shift in history.

But how well do the two—relations between the self and writing which is part of an era's regime of writing on one hand and historical periods on the other—correlate? Have written words totally lost their “power over bodies” (Kittler, 2015, p. 17)? Do we, the so-called moderns, merely “process texts as deposits of meaning” (Winthrop-Young, 2015, p. 4)? Are written words no longer all about “power, and not knowledge or information” (Favret-Saada, 1980, p. 9)? It might be true that presently meaning, and therefore the signified, is paramount in our relation with written words; but is it also not true that our understanding of *East of Violent*, for instance, equally depends on the written intertextuality in the story that reshapes the already established meaning (Briggs & Bauman, 1992)? Answering a question about the story's audience, in an interview with BBC's Persian Service (2012), Mandanipour declares that his audience does not already exist, but he *creates* it with his stories. Is his response not an indication of the fact that, in spite of our focus on referential function of language, the written words have not lost all their power-effect as they are able to create people—just like the written words of the library books that created (or exterminated, depending on our view) the lovers?

In this chapter, I sought to make a similar argument (with a difference) about my informants in the Persian blogosphere: Although the dominant regime of writing in Iran, as seen in the Writing Skills books Iranian students use, denies written words the power-effect they used to enjoy and which is rooted in their materiality, Persian bloggers' daily practices of writing sometimes displays a virtually absolute power of words with

unforeseeable effects on the bloggers' lives. The difference between blogging and other forms of writing is that the blogging interface (with its tools making digital doodling with words more effortlessly available) and the blogosphere (that makes the creation of a self ready to be evaluated by the blogger and a community of fellow bloggers more easily achievable) facilitate these practices of writing. The blogging practices described in this chapter makes the power of written words visible again. Nooshin's blogpost organized around a seemingly random word makes visible the fact that words, in their domain shaped through a desire for words to juxtapose, structure our decisions without us being aware of their processes. If judged by the standards of the so-called modern regime of writing, the bloggers in this chapter appear to be insincere because the decision is made involuntarily and from without. Kaveh's series of blogposts demonstrate that his life choices leading him to extramarital relationships emanate from words exterior to himself. In addition to a belief in centrality of humans and their interiority, the modern regime of writing is oblivious to the power of words because—and not in spite of the fact that—we live in a world of words. The ubiquity of the materially expressed words paradoxically makes their power invisible. The example Heidegger famously uses to describe ready-to-hand-ness, an attitude toward tools when we put them to work, was a hammer. Only when the hammer is broken and refuses to do what it is supposed to do (that it no longer is ready-to-hand) we start to notice it. Like the Heidegger's broken hammer (1962, p. 103), un-ready-to-hand, it is only when the words do not work—when for instance one does not know about what one should write—that their power in forming ideas and changing fates comes into view.

Mallarme famously remarks that “one does not make poetry with ideas, but with words” (cited in: Bruns, 2002, p. 209). Just like poetry in the eyes of Mallarme, blogging sometimes makes meaning primarily with and against words in their material form. The meaning and expression of feelings all appear as an after-effect of the act of *doodling* words and typing them on the keyboard.

6

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6-1- INTRODUCTION

IN THE PRECEDING CHAPTERS, I argued that in the Persian blogosphere, bloggers may engage in practices of composing self-centering narratives that help them fashion selves invested with power as in these narratives bloggers are usually the stories' heroes and heroines. However, the independent blogging selves (evinced in *xodam* (myself) in the title of arguably the best-known Iranian blog) may not be completely 'autonomous' as self-fashioning in the blogosphere is affected by the formal properties of the

technological medium they use to write their accounts. Blogging, due to its formal properties, opens certain paths and possibilities for bloggers to fashion selves. Also, the blogging selves crafted in the process of composing self-centering narratives may not be considered ‘original’ or ‘sincere’ because in addition to the technological medium, the written words as they appear on the computer display may contribute to the interiority of the selves created online. In other words, the seemingly autonomous and original selves fashioned through composing self-centering narratives in blogs are made possible because the technology of blogging (through its formal properties) and the narratives of blogposts (through the materiality of words that comprise those accounts) *deny* the blogger both autonomy and originality. In this way, blogging therefore both undergirds and undermines the process of self-fashioning described in previous chapters. In the sections that follow I summarize the arguments I presented in those chapters.

6-2- WRITERS WRITING SELVES

The Persian blogosphere (as the suffix, -estān, in *veblāgestān*, indicates) and consequently blogs themselves, for bloggers, first and foremost represent a *place*. However, blogs are a distinctive type of online place as they exemplify an in-between space, most importantly between public and private. Although, public and private (defined in contrast to one another) are the most recognized cultural categories of space in Iran, the third place of in-between public and private, for instance embodied in architectural loci such as verandahs, rooftops, and neighborhoods, is also culturally known to people and generally carries some specific shared meanings. The in-between is

usually characterized by its ambiguity due to which it can be used by creative social actors to defy the rigid rules of public vs. private. However, my findings show that the in-between place of blogging is not merely a passive place used by active users—i.e., it is not simply utilized by active bloggers to think and act outside the box of public and private conventions. Not only do blogs *allow* public expression (associated with *zāher*) of the supposedly private inner selves (*bāten*), they also actively *encourage* it.

Bloggers may therefore be encouraged by their blogs (the in-between, personalized yet public stages they provide) to engage in composing self-centering narratives for the public to read. Blogging in this sense functions as a Foucauldian technology of the self. Bloggers fashion selves and bring about changes to themselves through sharing their stories. At the center of the bloggers' accounts that share many elements with melodrama (including high emotionalism and rich description of inner life) is the interiority of bloggers. In these accounts, bloggers' emotions are specifically important. Bloggers are called upon by the in-between place of blogs to write about their inner selves and to become melodramatic heroes and heroines of their own stories. To more clearly show the process of self-fashioning in the Persian blogosphere, my ethnographic evidence in the third chapter are mostly based on the stories of informants who blogged while they were dealing with a personal crisis—situations where my interlocutors felt they needed to give a new definition of themselves fit for the new conditions in which they found themselves.

The outcome of this practice of composing self-centering narratives is an autonomous, original subject (or a subject with the illusion of autonomy and originality), capable of expressing its genuine inner self and always relevant to the events taking place

in its social world. The emergence of this subject has consequences for the structure of power in Iran. When it comes to micro-relations of power, it jeopardizes the position of traditional intellectuals who used to enjoy the sole right to the production of meaning. These intellectuals use the same medium (blogging) to salvage their authority by trying to silence ordinary bloggers. When it comes to macro-relations of power, these subjects, against the government's will, do not see themselves as part of an *ommat* whose leader, *emām*, knows better than the followers themselves about their true inner selves (*nafs* as it moves along the "straight path" (*serāt-e mostaqim*)), their genuine interests, and the destination of the evolution of the self. In political terms, *emām qua qayyem-e mahjūrīn* (the protector of incapables) no longer fits this definition of the self which feels capable to bring desired, original changes to itself.

"Editor: Myself" was the title of the most recognized Iranian blog and the second Persian blog ever created. Existing studies of the Persian blogosphere have focused on the "editor" half of the title and have conceived of blogging in terms related to journalism and its direst consequences for power in formal politics. I focus on the "myself" half of the title to talk about how caring for the self has consequences for micro relations of power and indirectly for formal politics.

6-3- WRITING DEVICES

Upon deeper observation it becomes clear that blogging subjects (the *users* of the Foucauldian technology of the self as described in the previous section) are not absolutely autonomous. Although bloggers use the medium to bring desired changes to

themselves, they are not the sole cause of those transformations. It is partially because the technological medium they use for this purpose, blogging, is not a neutral carrier of the user's will. I, therefore, discuss in the fourth chapter how the materiality (in the sense of formal properties) of the technology of blogging contributes to the creation of selves in the Persian blogosphere.

As such, in the fourth chapter I argue against the dominant media ideology and its negative and positive models for medium's function. Rooted in a historical *horror materiae*, the negative model usually condemns the materiality of technological media as fetish. These negative models maintain that one should not attribute changes in one's self fetishistically to a material technology. If technology-as-fetish provides the negative model for the dominant media ideology, the prophet-as-messenger (or prophet as the perfect medium) offers a positive model. But do prophets (or, more specifically in my case, Prophet Mohammad, whom Muslims believe to be illiterate as an indication that he did not impact the message coming directly from God) simply receive the message from God and deliver it intact to people? In the fourth chapter I draw on a recent heated debate about the role prophet Mohammad played in the process of *vahy* (revelations) to discuss existing media ideologies in Iran.

My ethnographic evidence in the fourth chapter suggests that transformations bloggers bring to themselves may be influenced by specific possibilities that the technological medium of blogging provides for its users. In that chapter, I show that we need to go beyond a black-boxed view of blogging—a view that overlooks the formal properties of the medium and only focuses on its input (the blogger's written words) and output (a transferred self). In contrast to this black-boxed view, I argue that the

technological medium itself contributes to the creation of the self in particular ways. However, it is important that particular here does not mean preconceived. Blogging contributes to the creation of the self in ways that are different from those of other technologies of writing (including diary keeping), because the formal properties of these technologies are different and unique to them.

One key finding of the fourth chapter is that unlike what many have suggested bloggers do not always post on their blogs because they have something important to share with others—something that they cannot otherwise publicly communicate. My findings show that bloggers may blog in spite of that they do not have much to say. This is because blogs expect from and awaits bloggers to write. It is to say that blogs are ‘expectant systems’—systems with several gaps that are required to be filled by the end user so they can function. When bloggers respond to the expectations of their blogs, they follow the blogs’ ‘obligatory syntax’ or ‘script.’ The formal properties of a blog—that for example it can store and group posts and archive them or connect ideas and events through hyperlinks—open particular paths for selves to transform. For example, as one of my ethnographic findings portrays, for one of my informants, the hyperlinks that connected blogposts made a certain temporality possible in which the outcome of a return to the past was a future and newness was paradoxically a product of repetition. Blogging therefore contributes to the creation of selves by making this certain type of temporal conception available to its users.

My ethnographic evidence in the fourth chapter helps shed light on such particularities and inner complexities of the technology. In a sense, it returns the thingliness of the technology to it. Blogging is not like any other medium as it brings

with itself its unique formal properties and opens (but does not determine) new paths for self-creation. Anthropological investigation of blogging (or any other medium) should therefore not be limited to an investigation of its content (to learn what its content represents). It should include its materiality or formal properties too. In other words, an anthropological investigation of blogging should not simply look *through* the medium to see who the people that it represents are. This investigation at the same time should look *at* the medium to see what it does; what kind of subjectivities it enables. The fourth chapter therefore shows that blogging as a technology of writing is irreducible to both the content it helps communicate and also to other technologies of composing self-centering narratives.

6-4- WRITTEN WORDS

Not only is the blogging subject described in the third chapter (the hero or heroine of the self-centering blog narratives) not autonomous (i.e., independent of the technological medium of blogging as I show in the fourth chapter), it may not also be original (or sincere). In the fourth chapter, as I mentioned above, I argue that bloggers may write not because they have a lot to say, but in spite of not having much to share. But what happens when bloggers do not have something to say but still want to say something? About what topics they write in these situations? I show in the fifth chapter that in these cases bloggers may engage in a practice of ‘digital doodling’ with words and as a result of this practice the topic (*mozu*) about which they would write *shows* itself to them. Like the *real*, drawing-type doodling that generally gives precedence to the materiality of lines

over message and meaning, in the digital doodling with words that takes place in blogs, the material expression of ideas comes before ideas themselves. This practice in one form or another is common in the Persian blogosphere.

In the cases that ideas come secondary after the material expression of those ideas, there exists a lack of an explicit plan, specific intention, prior contemplation, and knowledge, which, as I show in the fifth chapter, may be construed as a lack of sincerity on the blogger's side. In other words, this practice may be interpreted in a way in which the individual as portrayed in the blog is not considered to be *genuine* or *sincere*, because the ideas and thoughts do not come from inside the person, from his or her heart, the alleged seat of his or her thoughts and emotions. They in contrast come from outside and improperly affect what that is inside. I discuss this practice of blogging in terms of what I call a non-intentional (in contrast to both intentional and unintentional) approach to writing. Although these blogposts are not the result of an unintentional writing, as the bloggers are aware of what they do, the material expression of words on the computer display evokes some implications that in return non-intentionally determine the meaning of the written words—words that may have an actual effect on the blogger's real life.

I, moreover, show that although the dominant regime of writing insists ideas should come before the material expression of those ideas, for example on the computer display, historically there have existed culturally acknowledged regimes of writing in which material expression of ideas took precedence over the ideas themselves. This in fact separates two groups of Perso-Islamic mystics: while for some figures, spiritual experiences and mystical thoughts and emotions went before their expression, for others, writing and written words preceded the mystical experience. It is only after the *modern*

turn in Persian literature (signaled by the New Poetry, *she'r-e no*, movement) that the former regime of writing was preferred over the latter and the latter was considered to be an indication of insincerity. Precedence of ideas over their material expression is now considered to be the 'official' regime of writing in Iran as it is what Iranian students learn in their Writing Skills books. I show this through my conversations with Iranian teachers and education experts that took place during my participation in the writing of a complementary Writing Skills book for Iranian students during my fieldwork.

I finally show that this transformation in the regimes of writing toward one in which ideas should come before their material expression has consequences for the writing selves as the relationship between the self and writing has changed from one of material expression and mimicking to an emphasis on meaning and understanding. Blogging therefore can be interpreted as an indication of the *return* of the repressed power of words rooted in their materiality.

6-5- CONCLUSION: AN ANTHROPOLOGICALLY-INFORMED THEORY OF MEDIA

Although ultimately about identities crafted online, my research underlines an understanding of fashioning selves through the technological media of inscription that concerns itself, in seemingly counterintuitive ways, to the negotiation of alterities rather than the formation of identities. In this understanding of media, attention is primarily paid to alterity (in its many forms, including that of the technological medium and its formal properties and the materiality of written words) rather than identity (in the form of the identity or equivalence of the blogger's self and his or her accounts), for the identities

crafted through media are made possible indeed because of those alterities. The creation of *genuine* narratives that in turn helps fashion *autonomous* selves needs *insincere* accounts and includes individuals who are *dependent* on the medium and the paths and possibilities it provides towards an understanding of the self. As such, this understanding of technological media maintains that medium actually works to help fashion human selves because it is the *Other* of “the traditional image of what is human—” because “in a specific sense, it is deeply inhuman” (Zielinski, 2006, p. 6).

In my research, instead of focusing on the function of medium as a conveyor of the meaning presumably stemming from the *inside*, I, therefore, emphasize the *otherness* of medium—its being *outside*. However, the otherness of medium indicates a very unique outside—an outside that “constitutes the very being of what it lies outside of” (Stiegler, 1998, p. 193)—i.e., the human self. This approach to medium where the outside and inside are not neatly demarcated implies a between. As such, my research offers an understanding of medium that underscores its function not as merely a means of communication that accords “an ontological privilege to the already constituted individual,” (Simondon, 1992, p. 298) but as a mediation in terms of intervention—a between or gap. Understood as an intervention, signaling both separation and connection, although the medium of blogging makes impossible the perfect equivalence of the blogger’s account and his or her self, because there is always a gap between the two (the gap that necessitates mediation; an outside that constitutes the so-called inside), bloggers can successfully fashion selves (become *virtually* identical to their own accounts) because of the same gap. In other words, although bloggers use their blogs to fashion selves and bring to themselves desired changes, as an intervention, gap, inside outside, or

between, the medium qua mediation denies the full transformation of alterity into identity as it, by definition, does not let the unification of blogger's account and his or her self.

Taking the mediation function of medium seriously, my research suggests an anthropologically-informed media theory that does not merely concern itself to the question of the transmitted content and meaning, the traditionally *human* aspect usually rendering media communication important (what Benjamin (1996, p. 65) calls the “bourgeois conception of language,” or any other media for that matter), and instead pays attention to the creative *forces* of technological media—or, if we are still following Benjamin (p. 63), the immediacy of mediation. Taking these forces into account, the anthropologically-oriented media theory I suggest here, therefore, needs not to underscore plans and planned transformation of the self to the detriment of improvisations, purposes at the cost of possibilities, and meanings at the expense of the materiality of semiotic forms.

Subject (when it is particularly differentiated from its kin term, self) is a parallel to the above-mentioned gap implied in the mediation function of the medium. As a gap or intervention, medium-as-mediation marks both separation and connection. Subject is likewise the gap (or the Lacanian void) that indicates both the possibility for the self to be crafted in new ways (identity) and the collapse of every project of self-fashioning (the failure of the self to be identical to what it desires to be).¹⁰⁸ In the way of analogy, subject

¹⁰⁸ Recounting the Greek myth of Prometheus and Epimetheus, Stiegler argues for a flaw in humankind because of which humans “only appear in disappearing” (Stiegler, 1998, p. 188). Because animals are “positively endowed with qualities,” they are predestined. However, because the gift to humans is negative (the lack of any qualities as Epimetheus ran out of them when creating humankind), humanity “is without predestination” (Stiegler, 1998, p. 193). This negativity defines humanity. Humans, therefore, must “invent,

is the missing space or the gap in a sliding tile puzzle that makes any new configuration possible, but at the same time makes all end-configurations imperfect and lacking. Subject in this way is in fact *other* to one's sense of self. My research shows that medium-as-mediation in tandem with subject-as-void makes self-crafting (im)possible by providing a specific kind of place—an in-between, a literal milieu (mi-lieu), if Jean-Luc Nancy (2000) is to be followed, or a plateau, if Deleuze and Guattari's expression is preferred, that is adequately connected and sufficiently loose, both linking and separating. An anthropological study of media that uses an approach underlining the mediation rather than the representational or instrumental functions of medium therefore also sheds light on the human subject—the central topic of anthropology.

My goal in this research was not to write an all-inclusive account of the practices central to activities within the Persian blogosphere. Nor was my object to give a linear history of blogging in Iran or the media life cycle of my interlocutors' blogs. My aim was to offer an ethnographic account that attends to the intersection of self-fashioning and blogging. Through a philosophically-tuned and culturally-informed analysis of my ethnographic and textual evidence, I offered new insights into understanding the technological media of inscription as forces or potentials that open possibilities. For me, an investigation of the link between self and blogging is therefore not to reiterate the ideas of media instrumentality in the representation of otherwise silenced identities but to illustrate how the formal properties of the technological medium and the materiality of

realize, produce qualities," but "nothing indicates that, once produced, these qualities will bring about humanity, that they will become *its* qualities" (Stiegler, 1998, pp. 193-194).

written language support forces capable of contributing to the creation of the very self they seemingly only represent.

The question of the transmitted content is surely important. However, it does not suffice to stop at the level of views, ideologies, values, opinions, and beliefs expressed through the technological medium to learn about the represented identities. The specific material/technological dimensions of the medium should not be ignored, because the possibilities for self-fashioning are built into the very fabric of medium's materiality. This is another way of stating that media representation is not a pure transmission without residue and excess, a clean mathematical equation operation on whose one side stands the interiority of the individual and on whose other side the semiotic device that best describes it (figure 5.1 which is a duplicate of figure 0.4), but a creative, forceful operation. The equals sign of figure 5.1, in other words, does not appear at once between the two sides of the equation to link narratives and selves and accomplish the creation of identities.

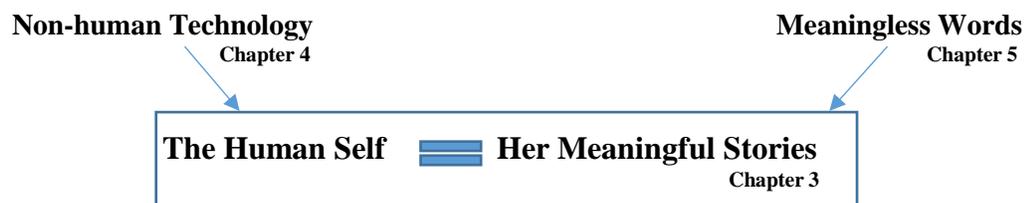


Figure 6.1 (the same as figure 1.4) Non-human technology and meaningless words both undergird and undermine the equivalence of humans and their stories.

If the equivalence of blogposts and bloggers is true—if in truth blogposts *represent* the blogger's inner self—it has become so in a process of mediation as described in previous chapters (and not simply through symbolic communication and

mere transmission of meaning). The process of mediation that helps bloggers fashion selves includes the forces intrinsic to a creative in-between or a milieu “characterized by a tension in force between two extreme orders of magnitude that mediatize the individual when it comes into being” (Simondon, 1992, p. 317).

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