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"The Vulgar Spirit of Blogging": On Language, Culture, and Power in Persian Weblogestan

ABSTRACT This article is an ethnographic study of Persian-language weblogs (blogs), focusing on a divisive argument among Iranian bloggers that came to be known as the "vulgarity debate." Sparked by a controversial blogger who ridiculed assertions that Islam was compatible with human rights, the debate revolved around the claim that blogging had a "vulgar spirit" that made it easy for everything from standards of writing to principles of logical reasoning to be undermined. My study focuses primarily on the linguistic side of the controversy: I analyze blogging as an emergent speech genre and identify the structural features and social interactions that make this genre seem "vulgar." I also examine the controversy as a confrontation between bloggers with unequal access to cultural capital and a struggle over "intellectualist" hegemony. In the conclusion, I use the construct of "deep play" to weave together multiple layers of structure, explanation, and meaning in the debate. [Keywords: Iran, weblogs, computer-mediated communication, speech genres, social status]

Blogging, due to its mundane nature, has the capacity to nurture the spirit of vulgarity. And what great pains intellectuals have to endure when they consider blogging to be a serious matter but at the same time fear this destructive plague... Refusing to comply with the principles of proper writing in the Persian language, including correct spelling and orthography, is the simplest effect that the blogging phenomenon, as a vulgar matter, can create in the cultural personality of a blogger. The severest effect of vulgarity is to recklessly make any kind of cultural, philosophical, religious or artistic claim. To express one's own opinion in such a way that its language and intonation is both personal and conveys emotion, in any field or discipline, is not deplorable, but rather the function of blogging. But to pretentiously make claims about any topic is to be affected by the vulgar spirit of blogging. It's not one's own fault either; the vulgar environment has gradually left its mark.

—Seyyed Reza Shokrollahi, *Khaabgard*

INTRODUCTION: THE VULGAR SPIRIT

On October 26, 2003, Hossein Derakhshan, author of a vastly popular Persian-language *weblog* (a website consisting of regularly updated writings arranged in reverse chronological order, usually by a single author), wrote an entry in which he mocked assertions made a few days earlier by Iranian Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi that Islam and human rights were not contradictory (Derakhshan 2003c). Derakhshan, or "Hoder" as he likes to be called,

charged that the "secular" Ebadi had turned into an ayatollah after she won the celebrated peace prize, and that this was a major sign that the lawyer intended to enter Iranian politics and possibly run for the presidency in 2005. Hoder also deplored the "political" claim that Islam and human rights were compatible, and, citing a single verse from the Qur'an instructing men how to deal with their wives, he asserted that Islam was inherently at odds with the most fundamental rights of human beings. He also created an opinion poll on his entry to ask his readers what they thought about Ebadi's remarks.

Hoder's entry on his blog, *Sardabir: Khodam* (Editor: Myself), provoked a huge reaction in the Iranian blogging community, which the bloggers themselves usually call "*weblogestan.*"[1] Eighty-one comments, both supportive and damning, appeared on his blog alone. Numerous others wrote their opinions on their own blogs, and some sent "trackback pings" to Hoder's entry, informing him (and his readers) of their articles.

A notable response to Hoder was an entry on October 30 by Seyyed Reza Shokrollahi, a journalist and literary critic, on his blog *Khaabgard* (Sleepwalker; see Figure 1). Under the title *Zende baad gand-e ebtezaal dar veblaagestaan!* (Long live the stink of vulgarity in weblogestan!), Shokrollahi lamented that

Veblaag-nevisi ba'd az moftazah kardan-e khat va zabaan-e faarsi, tavaaneste har mozoo'e jeddi va

FIGURE 1. Screenshot of Khaabgard, Reza Shokrollahi's weblog.

andishe-varzaane raa niz be lajan-e bimaari-e ebtezaal bekeshad va mesl-e sarataan ham pishraft konad va nevisande va khaanande va hame raa be gand bekeshad.

[Blogging, after laying waste to the Persian script and language, has been able to drag every serious and intellectual topic into the scum of the disease of vulgarity, grow like a cancerous tumor, and trash the writer, the reader and everyone else]. [Shokrollahi 2003b]

He also remarked that the simplest form of *ebtezaal* (vulgarity) in blogging was disregard for the spelling and orthographic principles of the Persian language, and its most sophisticated form was recklessness in making any kind of statement in one's writing. In a follow-up entry, Shokrollahi wrote that "veblaag-nevisi ye joor neveshtane, va ghalat naneveshtan, savaa-ye mazmoon va mohtava, avvalin qadam baraaye neveshtane [blogging is a kind of writing, and writing correctly, regardless of content and subject matter, is the first step in writing]" (Shokrollahi 2003b). Together, these entries touched off the *bahs-e ebtezaal* (vulgarity debate); a cacophony of blog entries, online magazine articles, comments, responses, and counterresponses that continued for several weeks. Writings differed both in their definition of vulgarity and in their focus on language or culture.[2] Although many bloggers sympathized with Shokrollahi's concerns about vulgar linguistic and cultural practices, others charged that he wanted to stifle free speech and compared him to government censors. In the *domain of language, the controversy surrounded* both the need to observe standard orthography and grammar, and the choice to write in formal or colloquial Persian. Some, including Shokrollahi, maintained that a set of orthographic standards must be observed even when writing in a *shekaste* (broken) conversational style, whereas others countered that it was completely logical for one to write in exactly

the same way one thought, even if that meant disregarding linguistic standards. A few bloggers on both sides of the debate challenged the notion that a single standard of writing existed, or even that there was a common baseline among the different standards that one could adhere to.

What follows is an ethnographic study of the vulgarity debate, which spanned approximately two months, from late October to late December 2003. I first took notice of Iranian blogs in February 2003, when I stumbled onto the site PersianBlog.com, the first Iranian weblog hosting service offering free web space and blogging tools to thousands of Persian speakers. In April, I decided to become a member of the community myself by starting two blogs: an English one entitled *Persian Blogger Chronicles*, and a Persian one entitled *Parishaan Belaag* (disheveled blog) in which I wrote, alongside the conventional personal notes and political commentaries, my observations and analyses of conversations among bloggers and some of their emergent sociocultural practices. I established relationships with other bloggers by writing about them on my own blog or by visiting their blogs and commenting on their entries. Throughout my research, I had many interesting conversations with Iranian bloggers that were conducted outside the blogging medium itself, mostly through e-mail and instant messaging but also over the telephone. Like Annette Markham in her research on text-based virtual reality (1998), I felt it necessary to experience blogging firsthand and over an extended period of time to acquaint myself with the nuances of communication and social interaction among the community of bloggers and to better equip myself for interpreting and making sense of what bloggers were doing and how they were articulating their actions. This ethnography is, therefore, as much informed (and constrained) by my own experiences as an amateur blogger trying to make

inroads into weblogestan as it is by my observation and interrogation of other bloggers' communicative practices and social interactions.[3]

The vulgarity debate drew my attention more than ever before to the complex linguistic practices of bloggers and their contending understandings of what these practices meant. My interest in this debate had a lot to do with Shokrollahi's description of blogging as having a "vulgar spirit." I view this description as fitting very nicely with a notion of blogging as a speech genre, in the sense developed by Mikhail Bakhtin (1986). As an emergent genre, Persian-language blogging may be developing an outer orientation and an inner, thematic orientation that sets it apart from other genres of speech, including the offline literary and journalistic genres that Shokrollahi and some of his associates had mastered well ahead of settling in weblogestan. I argue that the "intellectualist" frustration with this medium reflects an uneasiness with the linguistic and cultural practices that are becoming prevalent in tandem with the emergence of these generic orientations. I also argue that the vulgarity debate reflects a cultural and political clash between a *roshanfekr* (intellectual) class who consider themselves to hold a certain amount of authority in matters of language and culture and a larger group of people who see blogging as just the place to be free from any kind of linguistic or cultural authority and are fed up with what one blogger called "intellectualist pretense" (Dolatshahi 2003b). As I examine some of the arguments in the vulgarity debate, I also refer to specific examples in which bloggers metapragmatically index themselves as linguistic and cultural rebels by being deliberately careless in their writing or by otherwise using language in unorthodox ways.

ANTHROPOLOGY, TECHNICISM, AND "DEEP PLAY" IN CYBERSPACE

There are at least two reasons why an ethnographic and anthropological perspective is well suited for studies of cyberspace, including the one outlined in this article. First, there are a plethora of new and interesting social formations whose emergent relationships, linguistic practices, power dynamics, and constructions of individual and collective identities need to be understood and could benefit immensely from multilayered, multisited, cross-culturally comparative ethnographic analyses grounded in social theory. Indeed, calls are increasingly being made for an ethnographic and anthropological approach to the study of computer-mediated communication and online communities (DiMaggio et al. 2001; Escobar 1994; Fischer 2003; Hakken 1999; Kottak 1996; Miller and Slater 2000; Wilson and Peterson 2002).[4] The second reason, closely related to the first, is that too many scholarly investigations of online communities, thus far, have uncritically adopted the utopian or dystopian assumptions of "cybertalk" in the popular imagination, leading to largely unsupportable claims about the revolutionary consequences of the Internet for social, cultural, and political processes (Hakken 1999; Wil-

son and Peterson 2002). Empirical studies that do not take for granted the technicist claims of an "Internet Revolution," that focus on the impacts of social and cultural processes on cyberspace as well as the more-often cited influences of cyberspace on society and culture, and that view the technologies of the Internet and all that is contained within it as cultural products are much needed for gaining a more realistic and more nuanced understanding of online communities.

My study of the vulgarity debate in weblogestan is motivated by both of these arguments. Discourse on Iranian blogging is inundated with uncritical technicist assumptions about the revolutionary impact of blogs on Iranian society, leading to numerous claims about the ways weblogs are rupturing Iran's social, cultural, and political fabric by promoting such previously nonexistent things as freedom of expression and unfettered relationships between young men and women (Delio 2003; Editorial 2003; Girvitz 2002; Hermida 2002). These analyses have been, in my opinion, overly and naively enthusiastic in extolling the social changes that are (or are wished to be) coming about as a consequence of the adoption of a new communication medium by a small percentage of Iranians.[5] Furthermore, they miss the complex patterns of adaptation, appropriation, and emergence that characterize the online sociocultural practices of bloggers.

That the vulgarity debate presents, for ethnographic and anthropological study, a range of interesting and complex social interactions, linguistic practices, and power dynamics should become evident in the following sections. A generative construct I like to employ in analyzing this debate is that of "deep play," elaborated by Clifford Geertz (1973) in his famous essay on the Balinese cockfight and picked up by Michael M. J. Fischer (2003) in his ambitious and wide-ranging call for renewing the ethnographic and anthropological voice in the 21st century. According to Fischer, *deep play* "refers to cultural sites where multiple levels of structure, explanation, and meaning intersect and condense, including the cultural phantasmagoria that ground and structure the terrain on which reason, will, and language operate but cannot contain" (2003:31). As I review the details and implications of the vulgarity debate in the conclusion, I will describe specifically the multiple levels of "structure, explanation, and meaning" that constituted the vulgarity debate as a site of deep play.

A final point needs to be made here about the conceptualization of my object of study. My research has focused exclusively on linguistic and cultural practices in an online context as well as cultural, metalinguistic, and metapragmatic articulations and contestations of these practices—themselves produced and disseminated online. This should not imply that either the practices themselves or the discussions about them are separated from the offline contexts in which each blogging subject lives and acts. Unfortunately, an in-depth study of all of these offline contexts would be far beyond the scope of my work: The bloggers I have encountered in my study are as diverse, and their contexts as

different, as high school and university students, journalists, literary critics, web designers, academics, and women's rights activists; living in Tehran, Toronto, Berlin, Boston, London, Prague, and Paris—along with numerous other anonymous and half-anonymous bloggers and blog readers scattered around the world. Despite this diversity, there are several important objects of inquiry that move across the multiple contexts and bridge the online–offline conceptual divide. These range from the Persian-language speech genres that compose the linguistic repertoires of Iranians to culturally constituted and politically charged tastes and sensitivities about "vulgarity" and ideological and political conflicts inside Iran that become matters of debate among Iranians from all corners of the world by virtue of the Internet's capability to bridge geographical distance. To interrogate and map out these issues in analyzing the vulgarity debate, I have attempted to apply and weave together two of the modes of multisited ethnographic construction proposed by George Marcus (1995): namely, "following the metaphor" (especially as related to the use of the term *vulgarity,* its social significances, and its grounding within broader cultural and political configurations in Iran) and "following the conflict" (consisting for the most part of tracking multiple strands of tension and debate, both within and outside the blogging community, over controversial linguistic and cultural practices). Each method calls for a sort of "mobility" in ethnography across different sites and connects the debate to multiple webs of signification, both online and off.

BLOGGING AS A SPEECH GENRE

Bakhtin (1986) asserts that every utterance takes shape in a definite "speech genre"; that is, every utterance has "definite and relatively stable typical *forms of construction of the whole*" (1986:78). Speech genres can be defined by their outer orientation to the context of production and reception and by their inner, thematic orientation.[6]

I show in this section that certain structural features of blogs, in addition to certain sociocultural practices in the Persian-language blogging community, have been contributing to the formation of explicit orientations for blogging that may warrant its classification as a distinct genre of speech. These are emergent orientations that arise from dialogue and fusion between other online and offline speech genres but that are also tied to the architecture of blogs as a medium of communication embedded within a larger "ecology" of media on the Internet (Erickson 2000; Herring et al. 2004). Their emergent character also means they are not fixed and are indeed continually contested by different groups of bloggers with different agendas, experiences, and masteries over preexisting genres of speech.

Each individual comes to a blog with a stock of speech genres at her disposal. These include "primary" genres that are mostly oral and simple, and "secondary" genres that are more complex and are usually written (Bakhtin 1986:62). The primary genres that are present in one form or another

on Persian-language blogs include an array of greeting and courtesy routines, small talk, casual political conversation (as in a taxicab), jokes, gossip, and bathroom graffiti among other genres. Common secondary genres include various journalistic forms, literary genres (including different kinds of poetry and prose), scholarly writing, travelogues, personal diaries, radio broadcasting, and religious lamentation and devotionals. Many bloggers and visitors are also familiar with various online speech genres—including e-mail, instant messaging, chat-room conversation, and asynchronous newsgroup discussion.

Thematically—that is, as far as an inner orientation is concerned—each of these speech genres may potentially be reproduced in a blog entry or visitor's comment. However, the genres' outer orientations, which are specific to their contexts of production and reception, cannot be as easily reproduced. Greeting and courtesy routines, for example, lose the immediacy and temporal structure of oral face-to-face conversation and begin to resemble static letters or e-mails when they are carried over to a blogging context. I have begun to think that the frequent use of ellipses in many Persian-language blog entries and comments is part of an attempt to compensate for this uprooting of the genre from its oral context, by simulating gaps in oral speech that work as cues for turn-switching, as when a speaker remains silent when it is his interlocutor's turn to speak. The following visitor's comment is a particularly good example of the use of ellipses:

> Salaam alpar-e geraami...moddatist ke be dalaayeli veblaag-neveshtan raa motevaqqef karde'am, va be jaay-e aan be jam'aavari-e linkhaayi bedard-bokhor kardam taa doostaani ke sar mizanand, hadde aqal shaayad bahre-i borde baashand...khob...khaahesh mikonam lotf karde va sari be veblaag-e man bezanid...va bebinid...baa arz-e tashakkor...shaad-o salaamat baashid...montazeram.

> [Hello dear Alpar...it's been a while now that I've stopped blogging and have started collecting useful links instead so that when people visit, they will at least take away something useful...well...please pay a visit to my blog...and see for yourself...thank you...may you be happy and healthy...I'll be waiting]. [Doorandish 2004]

In a similar manner, devotional blog entries that resemble the lamentations chanted in mourning ceremonies for the Shi'a Imams lose much of the emotional content carried by aural and visual cues in the oral performances. Often, bloggers who produce such texts on their blogs use *emoticons,* borrowed from instant messaging services like Yahoo Messenger, to express such emotions, as in the excerpt in Figure 2 written by a blogger during the mourning month of Muharram. Even when complex secondary speech genres like journalistic writing are involved, a blog entry may adopt a much more informal and personal tone than what is customary in a newspaper, in part because of a perceived immediacy and intimacy in the relationship between the blogger and his or her visitors. The following excerpt is

FIGURE 2. This is an excerpt from a blog entry mourning for Imam Husayn ibn-e Ali, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, who died in a battle in Karbala in the late seventh century. Shemr is the name of his murderer: "How nice if when one is dying, one's head is on his son's lap—But I would die for Husayn (peace be upon him)—When he opened his eyes in the pit, he found that his head was on Shemr's lap [weeping emoticons from Yahoo Messenger]—My friends, in Karbala, in the master's [Imam Husayn's] shrine, I saw—With what respect and humility the pilgrims would enter—They would respectfully turn their shoes in to the shoe-keeper and enter the shrine barefooted—But the depraved Shemr sat on Husayn's chest with his boots on. [weeping emoticons from Yahoo Messenger]"

from Ali Pirhoseinloo's blog, a journalist living in Tehran (the bold text is a hyperlink):

> Vaay vaay vaay vaay. Ajab eftezaah-e bozorgi. Man av-valin nafaram ke khabaresh ro midam. Saayt-e isnaa hak shode. Tavassot-e yek haker-e kolaah-sefid. **Havij!**

> [Wow wow wow wow. What a big mess. I'm the first person reporting this. ISNA's [the Iranian Student News Agency] website has been hacked. By a white-hat hacker named Havij!] [Pirhoseinloo 2004]

What I am trying to show with these examples is that speech genres are transformed by varying degrees when bloggers incorporate them into their writing, even though thematically they may remain intact. It is the blogger who creatively brings various genres into a heterogeneous mix and thus transforms them, in line with pragmatic considerations related to his or her context of speech. These pragmatic considerations are themselves constrained by the structural features of blogs and the nature of interactions among bloggers and between bloggers and visitors. It is in these structures and interactions that I believe the contours of an outer orientation for blogging, as a distinct speech genre, may be found.

I posit three constitutive elements for an emergent outer orientation of Persian-language blogging: First, and perhaps foremost, is a blog entry's dialogic relationship with other texts on the Internet, particularly with other blog entries both on the author's blog and on blogs belonging to other people. As bloggers write their entries, they often refer explicitly to things that they themselves or other bloggers have said. A reference is most likely (but not always) in the form of one or more hyperlinks in the body of the entry that can transport the reader to the actual entry being referred to with a click of the mouse. The following excerpt from a blog entry by Reza Shokrollahi, which initiated the vulgarity debate, includes two such hyperlinks:

> Shirin-e ebaadi chand rooz-e pish sokhani goft dar-bareye hoqooq-e bashar va eslaam. Hossein-e der-akhshan yaaddaashti va pas-yaaddaashti nevesht-o modda'iyane...az qor'aan aaye aavard ke eslaam baa hoqooq-e bashar motenaaqez ast.

> [Shirin Ebadi said something several days ago about human rights and Islam. Hossein Derakhshan wrote a note and a post-note and pretentiously...cited verses from the Qur'an and argued that Islam and human rights are contradictory]. [Shokrollahi 2003a]

The bold items in the excerpt link to Derakhshan's blog entries, which Shokrollahi is referring to and commenting on in the same sentence.[7] The entire text uses these two blog entries as an excuse to make its point about linguistic and cultural depravity in the Persian blogosphere.

While a blog entry often responds to something that has already been said on another blog or elsewhere, it must necessarily take into account the possible responses that it will incite as well. These responses may appear on another blog, which may, in turn, link back to the first entry by way of hyperlinks. They may also appear on the original blog entry, in a special section designated for visitors' comments. Bloggers usually take the comments and responses they receive very seriously. Often, bloggers will add a postscript to an entry they have written to respond to some of the comments they have received (and this, in turn, may incite more responses), or they may enter the comments section themselves and write a response to some of the comments there. Bloggers may also decide not to allow comments for a particular entry, to disallow commenting after several responses have been posted, or to delete or edit comments that they find irrelevant, obscene, or hateful. In all these cases, bloggers take an active, dialogic stance toward the responses of their readers—both the comments already written and those they anticipate.

Second, an outer orientation of the blog is also shaped by its temporal structure. Blog entries are organized

chronologically, with the most recent entries appearing at the top of the page, so that the newest text is always what a visitor sees first. Older entries appear below the more recent ones, and the visitor will have to "scroll down" to see them. Beyond the latest couple of blog entries, the rest of a blogger's writings can only be accessed through the archives or by running a search, unless the blogger refers to them explicitly in a new entry or elsewhere on the page.

The chronological ordering of blog entries means that any text, no matter how important, well written, or popular, will eventually shift down to the bottom of the screen and out of sight in the archives as newer texts are composed and posted. When an entry is a few days old, visitors are usually more reluctant to comment, as the blogger has already probably moved on to something else (if not, it is probably a sign of the blog's stagnation, which is an even stronger disincentive to comment). One consequence of this is that a blogger may not consider it the best use of her time and energy to write a very well-planned, thoroughly cohesive, logically sound article that will be subject to careful and rigorous analysis when she knows that her article will only capture the attention of her readers for a brief amount of time. Shorter, bolder, more provocative but perhaps less coherent writings are often preferred to longer, better thought-out but possibly less exciting ones.

A third constitutive element in the outer orientation of blogging is the manner by which a blogger gains access to an audience, which situates blogging within an ongoing contest for social status and popularity. When a new blog is created, the author finds himself on an isolated virtual island in a sea of blogs that variously contribute to a continuous and often highly interlinked stream of discourse. To make himself known and his voice heard, the blogger needs to somehow interrupt this stream and draw attention to his own words. This can be done only if the blogger's words are dialogically as well as "virtually" connected to what others in the blogosphere are saying while also individually creative and expressive enough to warrant attention. A "virtual" link to the outside is established through the use of hyperlinks, which are an immensely important factor in a blogger's efforts in attracting attention.

When bloggers use hyperlinks in their text to refer to something another blogger has said, they are automatically setting themselves up to be noticed. Links between blog entries can be detected using various tools on the Internet, and when a blogger who is interested in seeing what others have been saying about her finds the new blogger's entry about herself, she may link back to these words in an entry of her own, thereby making the dialogic circle complete. A somewhat easier and more prevalent way for a blogger to make himself known is by commenting on other people's blogs and leaving his blog address in his comment. This way, he is again inserting himself into the existing stream of discourse and demanding to be acknowledged. A fairly well-established custom of reciprocity called *did-o baazdid* (which translates to "seeing and re-seeing") obliges the host blogger to return the visit and leave a comment on the visiting blogger's most recent entry.[8] Reciprocal visits often lead to reciprocal "blogrolling," the creation of a list of permanent links on a blog to other blogs, which often serves to signify circles of association and alliance between groups of bloggers. Provided that the new blogger continues to have interesting things to say, as she creates more links, she will see more bloggers linking to her writings and placing her on their blogroll, thereby expanding her readership and, by extension, her social status among other bloggers. Many bloggers include publicly accessible "statistics meters" on their blogs, which display information about the number of "hits" (individual page requests) they receive each day. The statistics meters become objective indices of fame and can serve to delineate hierarchies on the basis of popularity.[9]

Having described the probable constitutive elements of an outer orientation for Persian-language blogging, I aim to propose a unifying inner, thematic orientation, as well, that would hold true across the various possible appropriations of online and offline speech genres in each individual blog entry. This unifying inner orientation has to do with the manner in which each blogger indexes an entry's utterance event, including its time and speaking subject. This is mostly done in a sentence at the end of each blog entry, which may read something like "posted by Alireza at 7:08 AM." This sentence is usually followed by a link to the comments section, signaling a change in the speaking subject from the blogger to the visitors and marking the boundaries of the blog-entry utterance. Most bloggers also index themselves as speakers through multiple uses of the first-person singular pronoun within the body of their text. Finally, the speaker usually describes himself explicitly in the title of his blog, visible at the very top of the page, which announces the blog's name and briefly describes its content and authorship.

The blogger's indexing of himself as the speaking subject—both on the level of the blog as a whole and at the level of each individual entry—serves as a key element in the overall constitution of his online self. This self is not only the speaker of the words on the blog (aside from the comments, which are clearly demarcated spatially, temporally, and in terms of a change in speaking subjects) but also the owner of the blog as a "space" of self-expression and social interaction. Furthermore, the blog seems to become a "shell" or "body" of sorts that encapsulates a disembodied self in an environment that is, on the one hand, almost exclusively reliant on the low-bandwidth communication medium of text (but not entirely, as bloggers also make use of graphics and, to some extent, music) and, on the other hand, constituted by rich and complex social interaction. Linguistic and stylistic considerations—including the choice whether to abide by formal grammatical and orthographic standards or to opt for a freer, more flexible colloquial style—gain an immense importance in this situation, in which all the blogger has at his disposal for fashioning his individuality is the text of his writings and the general look and feel of his blog (Markham 1998; Turkle 1995).

My own foray into the vulgarity debate, which was a fundamental part of my research, clearly reflects the influence of these outer and inner orientations on an academic

research project incorporating various genres of scholarly writing. I started out with an entry on December 13, 2003, in which I remarked that the vulgarity debate reflected a "war between genres of blogging" (Doostdar 2003). To attract the attention of the key players in the debate (essential if I wanted to be noticed by anyone), I made multiple hyperlinked references to their blog entries and speculated about how the work of each of them might constitute a separate genre. I used provocative yet loose-fitting labels to briefly describe three genres of blogging (a taxicab genre, a journalistic genre, and a bathroom graffiti genre) and noted that I would try to describe each of these genres in more depth in subsequent entries. Shortly after I had posted my entry, Dariush Mohammadpour and Reza Shokrollahi, two of the bloggers I had talked about, linked to my text in the *linkdooni* sections of their blogs (lit., "linkdump"—a special section on some blogs that consists of a regularly updated list of links, often with a few words of commentary).[10] These two references led to a brief surge in the number of visitors to my blog, which subsided soon afterward.

To substantiate my claims about the generic classification of blogs, I conducted a statistical analysis of the 50 most recent entries on six of the blogs that had contributed to the vulgarity debate. Ideally, I wanted to see if there was any correlation between the number of links in each blog entry and the main function of language I believed it was performing (Jakobson 1960). The result was a long and highly speculative analysis with colorful charts and multiple references to the bloggers I had analyzed as well as to "authoritative" linguistic sources such as online commentaries on the works of Bronislaw Malinowski and Roman Jakobson. To ensure that a substantial number of people would see the post, I asked one of my blogger friends in Iran to post a link to my entry on a popular "group blog" administered by Derakhshan, in which bloggers put links to interesting things they find on the Internet but in which it is forbidden to put links to other blogs. My friend said he would do it, even though he knew the link would be erased immediately. Shortly afterward, both Shokrollahi and Derakhshan linked to the post (creating another surge in my daily hits) and I received an e-mail from Derakhshan who said he wanted to interview me about my research to inspire other people to take blogs more seriously.

I did not receive a lot of serious comments on my analysis other than some very general praise along with comments from several bloggers who asked me to look at what they or others had written on the "same topic" (I interpret this second kind of comment as being part of the competition for social status and popularity I described above). Nevertheless, the high number of visitors that I had received thanks to Hoder and Shokrollahi's references inspired me to work harder on a commentary in which I did a more thorough investigation of language use on several blogs and its relationship to power and status in the blogosphere. It did not take long for these last two entries to be noticed, as my blog was already in the limelight for my previous post as well as for a separate page I had just set up in which I had started to collect all the relevant material

امروز مامان برای دیدن یکی از خاله ها رفت همدان...البته نه برای دید و بازدید و دیدن اون بلکه برای عیادت خاله که توی بیمارستانه....!خلاصه امشبرو من و بابام مجردی میگذرونیم...!برای همین هم زنگ زدم به باباوگفتم;ها که غذایلد نیستیم درست کنیم..،(به جز نیمرو) لااقل پنج - شیش تا سمبوسه بگیر تا باهم بخوریم...(البته با سه - چهار کیلو سس!؟) بابام که هی می گفت;نه سمبوسه خوب نیست کباب بهتره...

FIGURE 3. An example of a blog entry written in a conversational style, with casual spelling, orthographic, and punctuation mistakes. If the text were to be translated with its mistakes intact, it would look like the following: "today mom went to see one of my aunts in Hamedan....Although not to just visit but to see aunty who's in the hospital....!Anyway my dad and I will bespending tonight bachelor-style...!That's why I called dadandsaid:we can'tcook...(except scrambled eggs) why don't you at least get five or six samosas to eat together...(of course with three to four kilos of sauce!?) my dad kept saying:no samosas are no good kabab is better..."

that I could find on the vulgarity debate (and on which I had also subtly invoked Harvard's name to draw more attention). Most significantly, Hoder referred to the posts as "the first serious academic efforts to understand Iranian blogging" (Derakhshan 2004). My hits skyrocketed, several people (including Hoder) added me to their blogrolls, and I subsequently spoke on the phone with Hoder about my genre theory. Meanwhile, around the same time as my last commentary, I redesigned the graphical layout of my blog with a new banner, new links, and thumbnail images of the newest books I was reading to fashion a more professional and hip image of myself. I also struggled continuously with the question of whether to write in a formal or conversational style and indeed experimented with several different styles as I felt the tension between the need for rigor in my academic pieces and at the same time the need not to come across as too dry.

GENERIC CLASH OR HEGEMONIC ANXIETY?

In his tirade against "vulgarity" in weblogestan, Shokrollahi had asserted that "blogging is a kind of writing, and writing correctly, regardless of content and subject matter, is the first step in writing" (2003b). What this characterization of blogging misses is the rich reservoir of speech genres, including many primary oral genres, that blogging draws on to answer a blogger's communicative needs online. For many of the bloggers who write to express themselves or to establish relationships with other people, blogging may be closer to an oral mode of communication than to a written one (Figure 3 is a good example).[11] Their neglect of standards of proper writing is not much different from the carefree attitude of many users of instant messaging services, e-mail, and cell-phone text messaging who use "Penglish" (Persian transliterated using English letters) to send quick notes to friends and relatives. Usually, what matters most to the speaker in this sort of communication is the pragmatic consideration that a message be comprehensible for its receiver.

For some other bloggers, the form of conversational writing is quite important as they feel their writing would

only be authentic if its form were free from the burden of standards. Dokhtarak-e Shaytaan (Mischievous Little Girl) is one such blogger:

> Man shakhsan nemitoonam ham dar mored-e dorost-nevisi tamarkoz konam ham matlabam ro benevisam hat-taa ba'desh ham ke miam matlabam ro tas'hih konam baaz mibinam shekl-e dorostesh ro doost nadaram va mizaaram baa hamoon shekl-e ghalat-e geraameri post beshe.

> [I personally can't write my entry and focus on writing correctly at the same time. Even when I'm finished and I come back to correct my text, I see that I don't like the corrected version and I let it be posted with the incorrect grammar]. [Dokhtarak-e Shaytaan 2003]

For still other bloggers, writing with spelling and orthographic mistakes may be a form of resistance. I will describe the practices of these bloggers in more detail below.

When it comes to the "more severe" form of "vulgarity"—that is, "recklessness" in making claims about every cultural, philosophical, religious, and artistic topic—Shokrollahi may be justified in calling blogging a "vulgar matter." The emergent outer and inner orientations of blogging that I described in the previous section—that is, a blogger's preoccupation with gaining popularity and reputation within the community of bloggers, the focus on a textual constitution of self, and the special formal limits imposed on the blogger's work because of temporal structure—can lead to a radically different set of priorities than those of the more "noble" genres of traditional journalism and literary composition. In blogging, speed often takes precedence over thoroughness, outlandishness over rigor, and emotive self-expression over dispassionate analysis. Perhaps it is to battle these very tendencies and to establish a new set of genre conventions for blogging (thereby altering its "spirit") that some of the most serious bloggers rigorously use structural features like category archives (to organize blog entries atemporally) and other forms of content hierarchy (including linkdumps, separate spaces for guest bloggers, and static webpages), in addition to instituting policies for controlling visitors' comments and making explicit statements about their writing styles. But in the end, even the most sophisticated kind of "vulgarity" may not be as much a matter of the "spirit" of the speech genre itself as it is an issue of the intentionality of its speakers. This brings me to the final section of my argument, in which I conceptualize the vulgarity debate as a clash between two classes of people with unequal access to cultural capital.

The main critics of "vulgar" language and culture in weblogestan have been journalists, writers, and literary critics whom I will collectively describe as part of a *roshanfekr* (intellectual) class and who often explicitly describe themselves as such.[12] The opponents of these critics have also included intellectuals but more often are "nonintellectuals" (Gramsci 1971), inasmuch as they are not intellectuals by social function or profession. Reza Shokrollahi, the blogger who initiated the debate on vulgarity, is a journalist who uses his blog mainly to publish cultural commentaries,

book reports, critiques of literary works and films, proceedings from literary seminars, and interviews with novelists and other cultural figures. In the fall of 2003, he organized the first Iranian short-story competition held completely online. Around the same time, he began a series of entries on correct orthography, in which he pointed out common mistakes, particularly in the domain of online publishing. The collection of these activities, along with the blogger's professional experience and his strong writing style, reflect a considerable amount of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984)—that is, very broadly speaking, an index of membership in the Iranian roshanfekr class.

Shokrollahi and his associates have mainly treated the concept of "vulgarity" in a technical aesthetic—and I would argue, Kantian—sense. A *vulgar* work is that which is facile and fools the senses into submission instead of provoking one to think about deeper meanings. Vulgar taste stands in direct contrast to a pure, disinterested taste that is preoccupied with form and is repulsed by plebeian concerns with the pleasures of the practical and the functional. It is precisely this Kantian notion of "pure" and "vulgar" taste that Pierre Bourdieu assails in his book *Distinction* (1984). Bourdieu believes that taste is an index of social distinction and an important part of a particular class's cultural capital, which is itself an element of "class habitus" and is transmitted through complex socialization processes involving the family and the education system. In Bourdieu's view, tastes are not inherently pure or vulgar. It is the dominant class that imposes, through "symbolic violence," its own taste as "natural" and "legitimate" and renders other tastes "illegitimate" and "vulgar."

Another useful notion in this discussion is that of "hegemony." Iranian intellectuals have been battling other cultural groups in the country for a long time in a bid to promote their own system of beliefs, values, and practices. Their influence, although significant, is probably still small relative to that of the dominant traditionalist clergy. Their strongest cultural and political leverage is most likely among academics and in the domain of print media—newspapers, magazines, and books. Recently, intellectuals of different stripes have been attempting (with uneven success) to spread their influence to the World Wide Web—particularly because it provides a powerful complement or alternative to paper-based media that are subject to stringent state controls as well as attractive potentials for networking and community mobilization. But just as the Internet provides intellectuals with a much-less-restricted environment for publication and cultural-political action, it also opens up possibilities for publication for nonintellectuals who have been excluded from this domain thus far. The absence of any kind of control means just about anything can (and does) get published and there is no authority to enforce linguistic and cultural standards.

The vulgarity debate, viewed as part of an intellectual battle for hegemony online, has two unequal fronts: The first, and easier, front is against those bloggers who occasionally flout the rules of grammar and orthography,

particularly when writing in the colloquial style, but who nonetheless respect these rules and the authority of the intellectuals who have fashioned themselves through both practice and rhetoric as guardians of language and high culture. The response of these bloggers to the vulgarity debate has mostly been one of acknowledgement of the intellectualist position. They either promise to try to adhere by the rules more closely, or at least lament that they are not as learned as the intellectuals and not able to demonstrate the same excellence in their writing. The second, more important, front is against those bloggers whom on some level refuse to acknowledge the authority of the intellectuals and whom challenge this authority by making deliberate mistakes or by engaging in otherwise questionable linguistic and cultural behavior.

A few examples will further illustrate my argument. Sanam Dolatshahi wrote a piece in the online magazine *Kaapochino* (Cappuccino) in response to Shokrollahi's critique of vulgarity, in which she questioned whether an unambiguous authority on language existed. Under the title *So'aalhaa-ye yek nevisande-ye mobtazal-e faarsi-e ghalat-nevis-e interneti* (Questions of a vulgar, mistake-making, Persian writer on the Internet), Dolatshahi (2003a) wrote that each style of writing had its own place and that there was no right or wrong in writing (she even placed "writing correct Persian" in quotes). Further, she switched to a broken conversational style in the second half of her article and made deliberate spelling and orthographic mistakes, metapragmatically indexing herself as a rebel against language authority and intellectualist cultural hegemony.

Dolatshahi's short article sparked several responses. One of these, and a particularly angry one, was an entry by Keivan Hosseini on his weblog, *Ignasio*, in which he launched a scathing attack against "the propagation of illiteracy," accusing Dolatshahi of "khiaanat [treason]" for "publicizing ignorance" (Hosseini 2003). Hosseini is a journalist with experience working for Iranian reformist newspapers and, more recently, the Persian service of Radio Free Europe in Prague, in addition to being one of the top-prize winners of the short story competition mentioned above. Like Shokrollahi, he possesses a significant amount of cultural capital. His use of the "illiterate" label, like Shokrollahi's use of "vulgar," was a kind of symbolic violence that distanced and distinguished him from the people he was criticizing and accentuated the boundaries between intellectuals and nonintellectuals.

Dolatshahi later wrote an emotional retort to Hosseini, with even more deliberate mistakes, on her blog *Khorshid Khaanoom* (Lady Sun), in which she attacked his position as mere "farhikhte baazi [intellectualist pretense]":

> Haalam az farhikhte baazi va har chiz-e dige-i too veblaa-gaa be ham mikhore ... beshin baa zaboon-e pedarbozor-gaat nazar bede va poz-e roshanfekri bede. Beshin ye jayi ro ke baraye kheylia dar hokm-e ye jaaye khodemooni va amn baraye gap zadane baa ye konferaans-e adabi eshte-baahi begir ... baa keraavaat va kot shalvaar bia beshin va oonaayi ro ke shalvaar li pooshidan maskhare kon.

> [I'm disgusted by intellectualist pretense and everything else like it among weblogs ... You should just sit down and express your opinion in the language of your grandfathers and brag about being an intellectual. Keep mistaking this place as a literary conference when others consider it to be an informal and safe place for chatting. Come sit down wearing a suit and tie and mock those who are wearing jeans]. [Dolatshahi 2003b]

The final example I will discuss is Derakhshan, the person who sparked off the vulgarity debate in the first place with his piece about the inherent contradictions between Islam and human rights. Hoder's work is a prime example of defiance against the cultural hegemony of the Iranian intellectual class. I would venture to say that he is trying to establish his own kind of counterhegemony in the blogosphere; one that values self-expression, individualism, and hedonism against any kind of traditional authority.[13] As far as language is concerned, Hoder says his blog is his "cherknevis-e zehn [lit., scratchpad of the mind]" (Derakhshan 2003b) and his language is "aagaahaane shelakhte [lit., consciously messy]" (Derakhshan 2003a). He prefers to spend his time writing a new entry instead of going back to what he has already written to correct possible grammatical or spelling mistakes. Additionally, he has no qualms about coining new terms (like *donbaalak* for trackback, and *linkdooni* for linkdump—both blog-related terms) without feeling any need to consult linguistic authority. Hoder is especially good at putting carnivalesque twists on familiar expressions: For example, *aaytiollaahi*—which combines "IT" (information technology) and *hezbollaahi* (lit., "member of the party of God," a reference to religious supporters of the 1979 Islamic Revolution)—refers mockingly to religious conservative technocrats; and *fakhr-ol internet hazrat-e moovebel taayp* (lit., "pride of the Internet, his holiness, Movable Type") both expresses extreme devotion for Movable Type (a prominent blogging tool) and pokes fun at the Prophet Muhammad (or his devotees at least) by perverting a popular phrase that is used to praise him. Interestingly enough, Hoder does not share the same attitude toward the English language as he does toward Persian. Being an undergraduate student at the University of Toronto, he has bemoaned several times the difficulties of writing essays in English and has linked to various online resources with guidelines on English writing. Hoder's approach to cultural hegemony, then, is highly differentiated between Persian and English speech communities: Whereas he directly assaults authority in the former, he feels a need to assimilate in the latter.

CONCLUSION: THE DEPTHS OF VULGARITY

As a site of deep play, the vulgarity debate in weblogestan brought together multiple layers of structure, explanation, and meaning. There are three main loci where these structures and meanings intersect and condense: in the meaning of *ebtezaal* (vulgarity) itself, in invoking the contentious issue of censorship, and in revealing tensions of linguistic and cultural authority and the ambivalences around "substandard" linguistic practices.

The word *ebtezaal* can be used both in a narrow aesthetic sense (which Shokrollahi took great pains to demonstrate as his intended meaning) and in a broader (vulgarized?) moral sense propagated by official discourse, for which pop music and sexually suggestive movies and texts are prime examples of vulgar materials. The two understandings of the word overlap and intersect. Complicating matters is the fact that the entire debate was spurred by an entry about contradictions between Islam and human rights, so that those bloggers who challenged the logic of that entry by describing it as a reflection of blogging's vulgar spirit were immediately framed by their opponents as advocates of the official and oppressive moral discourse. The debate itself, then, was vulgarized from the very beginning, which ironically supports the point about blogging's vulgar spirit (weblogs were, after all, the main venue of the debate).

The charge that Shokrollahi and other critics of the Islam versus human rights argument were in the same band as the moralizing institutions of the state naturally led to comparisons with government censors. The association gained heightened significance as it was made in the midst of another protracted discussion among Iranian bloggers (although one in which there was much more consensus): the issue of Internet filtering, which included the decision by some Internet Service Providers to block several blogs. It was particularly ironic that Shokrollahi was accused of siding with censors, as he had dedicated much of his energy on his blog to criticizing censorship or actively circumventing it—for example, by holding the short story competition completely online or by publishing the full version of a controversial interview with an Iranian novelist whose newest novel had been banned. In February 2004, Shokrollahi started a new "anti-censor" page on his blog with links to the full texts of a collection of novels and short stories that are censored, in whole or in part, in Iran. Ironically enough, the government's pretext for censoring these novels is precisely their "vulgar" material, including erotic passages and profanity.

The issue of linguistic and cultural authority and legitimacy is probably the central point of tension in the deep play of the vulgarity debate.[14] I have analyzed this tension by thinking of blogging as an emergent genre of speech tied to particular modes of sociocultural production and by contrasting it with other genres like journalism, academic writing, and literary composition. Labeling the linguistic and cultural practices of bloggers as reflecting a "vulgar spirit" seems to indicate that some of the expectations that are specific to these written genres have been brought to bear on blogging. The result is a clash that may lead to a refining of boundaries between the genres as well as the crystallization of competing genres within blogging that are characterized by different outer and inner orientations and are influenced in various ways by the primary and secondary genres of speech that have been interacting and fusing on the Internet. The generic clash can also be seen as one dimension of a struggle for the creation of hegemonies and counterhegemonies: An intellectual class sees its own linguistic and cultural authority threatened by the "vulgar" practices of bloggers and a disparate class of nonintellectuals deliberately undermines this authority by neglecting or flouting grammatical and orthographic standards and calling into question the linguistic and cultural authority of the intellectuals.

The juxtaposition of these three loci, with their respective webs of signification, is indeed compelling. On the one hand, if the formal defects of bloggers' writing and argumentation make them aesthetically vulgar and a cause for serious concern in the mind of a roshanfekr like Shokrollahi, the coarseness of the erotic texts he invokes on his "anti-censor" page similarly signifies vulgarity in the eyes of the censors of the state. And for the angry "common blogger," the rhetoric of Shokrollahi, the "anti-censor," becomes equated with the tyranny of the state censors he is challenging. On the other hand, if Shokrollahi makes censored "vulgar" novels accessible to his readers to challenge the dominant cultural hegemony that renders them "vulgar" in the first place, he is not acting very differently from the bloggers who deliberately flout linguistic standards and make outrageous claims about every subject in a rebellion against the intellectualist hegemony that dismisses them as "mundane" and "vulgar." The cycle of signification and ironic inversion never ends in this deep play of metaphors and conflicts, in which vulgarity, censorship, and dominance constantly define each other and conjure up their own mirror images.

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NOTES

1. The term *weblogestan* has become the Persian equivalent of *blogosphere*. It is used to refer to the collectivity of weblogs on the Internet but often connotes specifically the Persian-language blogging community. I have not been able to determine where this term has come from or when it was first used.

2. Shokrollahi, his associates, and many others focused primarily on a definition based in aesthetics (*vulgarity* as facileness, disharmony between content and form, etc.). Others viewed the concept in the more "commonplace" moralistic sense made prevalent by the Islamic Republic, which is concerned primarily with sexually suggestive texts, music, and films.

3. There is a substantial body of work on methodological issues in researching online communities. See, for example, Denzin (1999); Escobar (1994); Green (1999); Hine (2000); Kendall (1999); Mann and Stewart (2000); and Miller and Slater (2000) for discussions of qualitative methods, including ethnography.

4. For studies dealing specifically with the transformations of communicative practice online, see Crystal (2001); Herring (1996); and Keating and Mirus (2003).

5. Various estimates in the year 2003 put the number of Iranian Internet users at around three to four million people out of a

population of 68 million. There has not been a systematic survey since 2002, when there were around 1.6 million users. Estimates of the number of Persian-language weblogs, both active and inactive, range from around 20 thousand to 65 thousand.

6. In describing the outer and inner orientation of a weblog entry, I use both Bakhtin 1986 and Caton's (1990) formulation of genres of Yemeni tribal poetry, which makes use of Bakhtin and Medvedev's (1985) genre theory.

7. It often happens that a hyperlink is a link to a text and a comment on that text at the same time, making it a double-voiced utterance in the Bakhtinian sense (1981), albeit a hypertextual one. The above example would have been just such a case if instead of "a note," the title of the hyperlink to Derakhshan's first entry on Islam and human rights had been, let's say, "a pretentious commentary."

8. The practice of did-o baazdid is based on and named after the offline Iranian custom of visiting friends' and relatives' homes and having them as guests in return.

9. As an example of comparative popularity, Derakhshan receives several thousand hits a day, Reza Shokrollahi gets several hundred, and I receive a meager average of around fifty.

10. The term linkdooni was coined by Derakhshan. Shokrollahi prefers the term linkdeh (lit., "link village"). Others have created their own terms.

11. See Collot and Belmore (1996); Davis and Brewer (1997); and Ferrara et al. (1991) for discussions of similarities between computer-mediated communication and both oral and literate modes of communication.

12. Roshanfekr (lit., one with an "enlightened mind") has a distinctly different connotation than that of intellectual in the broad sense of the term. A member of the Iranian roshanfekr class has historically come to represent one who is conversant with modernist or postmodernist discourses, is a humanist, feels a certain commitment toward the well-being of his or her own society, and continually and publicly critiques the values, norms, and behaviors of that society. In popular discourse, roshanfekr may also connote more general meanings like "open-minded" or "liberal."

13. Hoder has a good deal of cultural capital—albeit of a different kind than that of typical intellectuals—to help him attain such a hegemony. This is mainly related to his widely acknowledged reputation as the person who brought blogging to Iranians and to his experience working as a journalist (writing mostly about technology and the Internet) with several Iranian reformist newspapers before he moved to Canada.

14. The "problems" that blogging has created for the Persian language have been discussed outside of the vulgarity debate, as well, and continue to inspire impassioned commentaries and heated debates. These are not restricted to the blogging community: In March 2004, for example, Shargh newspaper published a report critical of broken orthography and conversational writing styles with dialectal variations on weblogs (Farzaneh 2004). The report was entitled "Veblaaghaa loknat-e zabaan-e faarsi [Weblogs, the stutter of the Persian language]."

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