

Internet

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While exile refers to a glamorous return to the 'real' homeland, diaspora creates an alternative homeland, an imagined one. Exile denies 'here' and mourns for 'there'. Diaspora lessens the unbearable nostalgia by constructing a community based on the networks which link the dispersed. Exile emphasizes a centralized relationship with the spatial homeland. In diaspora, through the romantization of the 'promised land', emphasis is placed on a cobweb of relations amongst the scattered. Diaspora suggests deterritorialization, which does not mean geographical displacement – as it is for exile – but refers to the collapse of a fixed link between identity, culture, existence and a single place. In other words, diaspora is a deterritorialized World Wide Web.



SOURCE: WWW.IRANIAN.COM

Regarding diaspora from this perspective, it is vital to look at how the Internet has reshaped the landscape of the Iranian diaspora, its impact on the relationships within the Iranian diaspora, as well as between the diaspora and the homeland.

The Internet offers more convenient, more effective and cheaper ways of communication than any other medium. Moreover, this relatively 'democratic' form of communication goes beyond political, religious, or ethnic borders. The Internet offers an opportunity for the creation of a transnational public space/sphere. It is a social field for political, commercial, and socio-cultural interactions, stretching from Los Angeles to the Gulf states, from Japan to Scandinavian countries, from Sydney to Tehran.

The significant role of the Internet among the Iranians should be seen in the socio-historical context of the public sphere in Iran. In a harsh political climate and under an intense state control of mass media, the existence of public spheres – in the Habermasian sense – in Iran has been obscure and unattainable. Nonetheless, Iranians, like other peoples, discuss matters and exchange information in private meetings (parties), semi-private assemblies (for instance, during religious rituals), or in public places such as coffee-houses and mosques. These 'public spheres', or rather 'public spaces', are dominated by Muslim, middle-class, middle-aged men. Women, youth, and other ethnic or religious groups have, nonetheless, their own 'public spaces'.

As newcomers, Iranians in diaspora find themselves outside the mainstream public sphere of their host societies, despite the fact that the cyber public sphere is – at least the-

oretically – accessible to everyone. Women, non-Muslims, youth, non-Persian speaking Iranians and even non-Iranians can participate in the cyber public sphere. Cyberspace gives Iranians a chance to enter into and exit from public discussion anonymously. It is a virtual public sphere for Iranians, where they can talk about political issues or taboo subjects such as homosexuality (www.homan.com) and pornography (www.iransex.com) without the risk of persecution. It also offers the only opportunity for harshly split Iranian opposition groups to encounter one another. The Internet has, furthermore, managed to bridge the gap between exiles and the Iranian state – an otherwise impossible task. While exiles avoid any 'real' connection to the Iranian state, they can enjoy 'virtual' access to Iran's official sites, and vice versa.

#### Transfer of heritage

English, the chief language of the Internet, makes this cyber public sphere accessible for the young generation to open dialogue with the first generation. In the conventional Iranian media in diaspora, the second generation is generally absent. This new media has become a sphere wherein two generations of Iranian emigrants face each other. They talk about their lives, identities, past and future. 'How to be Iranian' is a ubiquitous issue for debate. In the same manner, first generation Iranians also see the Internet as a means to connect with their children and to transfer their cultural heritage to the next generation.

#### A case study

The number of Iranian sites and homepages online is inestimable and ranges anywhere from chauvinist to pornographic sites, and from socio-political sites to personal homepages. To gain more insight into the role of the Internet in the changing landscape of the Iranian diaspora, a quick brush-stroke picture is given here of one of the Iranian sites.

*www.Iranian.com* is one of the most serious online magazines, created by Mr Javid in September 1995. Javid is a journalist in his late thirties living outside Washington DC. The site is updated daily with features, news on Iran, poetry, fiction, photos, letters, and of course various links to other Iranian sites. 'Diaspora' is a popular section in the magazine, where contributors offer articles, fiction, or poetry about their diasporic experiences. One significant potential outcome of this site is an increasing consciousness of the diaspora.

In the news section, there are links to more than 150 other online Iranian media, both from inside and outside Iran (31 radio, 8 TV, 50 magazines, 22 periodicals, 39 dailies). Nowadays, one's keyboard is one's café. Iran's newspapers appear online several hours before they are available in print in news-stands in Tehran. Through the Internet, one can access *Radio Payam*, (Tehran's local radio) as well as *Radio Seday-e Iran* (a 24-hour radio station located in Los Angeles, whose broad-

casts cover only North America). Since a few years ago, *Radio Seday-e Iran* has placed its programme on the Internet. In Stockholm, daily Iranian local radio stations download programmes and rebroadcast them on air for Iranians. Moreover, there is a collaboration between *Radio Seday-e Iran* and the Persian section of *Radio Israel*. While the latter broadcasts a selection of programmes of the former to Iran, *Radio Seday-e Iran* resends Persian programmes of *Radio Israel* in North America for the Iranian Jews living there. In this delocalized diasporic space, where is the homeland?

The Internet is a more interactive media than any other of its kind. The Internet offers an opportunity for immediate feedback. On *www.Iranian.com*, this is mostly apparent in the section of 'Letters', which is updated daily with a large number of comments and critiques on features, news, or other materials published on the site. The letters are sent by faithful Iranian readers from around the world. The interaction is even more instantaneous in the 'Chat Room', where Iranians participate in dialogue in English or Penglish (Persian + English).

Furthermore, *www.Iranian.com* has conducted an annual 'man-of-the-year' survey, in which Iranians could vote to their favourite candidate. Another interesting cyber-interaction is what I call cyber-movement, a means through which Iranians are mobilized to participate in political activity. This could be to protest against the Iranian state or to support press freedom in Iran. For instance, the section 'In the Name of Pen' was started to help an imprisoned journalist in Tehran. Iranians were asked to send e-mail protests to President Khatami's homepage. Fortunately, thanks to all protests from the diaspora, the journalist was freed and reunited with his family in Germany.

'Nostalgia' and 'Pop-culture' are two photo-sections included in this site. Here, the 'golden age' of pre-revolutionary Iran is illustrated. Present-day Iran is presented in the section 'Photo of the Day' through photos received from readers or acquired from other sites. In addition to pictures, a large map of Iran can be brought up on the screen to reinforce the national imagination of Iranians. To complete the 'imagination' of homeland, current weather information of any part of Iran is also available.

Although the Internet is deterritorialized, it seems that there is still a passion for locality. The chat room is named 'Darya Kennar' (seaside), and refers to the coast along the Caspian Sea, a very popular vacation resort in the pre-revolutionary time. Another chat room bears the name of a popular coffee house in Tehran, 'Café Naderi', which has been a meeting place for intellectuals and artists since the 1950s. In both cases, one can witness a nostalgic reference not only to specific places but also to specific eras.

The section 'Abadan' is an apparent manifestation of this nostalgic gaze. Abadan was an oil-refinery boomtown, located at the

Iran-Iraq border. The modern Abadan, almost a colonial town, was built by the British after the Second World War. This beautiful city was entirely destroyed during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). Mr Javid, himself an Abadani, has dedicated a section of his site to Abadan. In this section, former Abadanis write their personal memories and 'historical tales' of their hometown. Perhaps this feeling is most transparent in the photo album of the section. There, old pictures from pre-revolution time as well as pictures of post-war Abadan are displayed. There are pictures of streets, squares, hotels and clubs, but also photos of the Abadan football team, a student group in the 1970s, and a 'typical house'. Throughout the section the visitor is struck by anguish and a nostalgic mourning for a beloved city, which no longer exists, but has gained a new virtual life.

#### Homeland in homepages

(Re-)production of the past is perhaps the main axle of the diasporic project. Collective history and culture are the cement which ties diasporic communities to each other. Cyberspace is used as a field to preserve this collective identity, not at least in the usage of symbols. Not identifying themselves with the current Iran – stigmatized by fundamentalism and terrorism – Iranian sites attempt to (re)construct a Persian profile by using tokens, symbols, and signs from the pre-Islamic cultural heritage. The national anthem and flag, art, history, and illustrations of landscapes are available online. This cyber-museum, like the conventional national museums, 'objectifies' the Iranian culture and history, making them 'immortal'. Thereby it creates an 'eternal authenticity', which in turn affirms the durability of the diaspora.

Diaspora, like the Internet, has neither a beginning nor an end. Nobody knows when an exile turns into a diaspora or when a diaspora becomes extinct. So is the Internet. Both constitute a wavy pattern of sites and links. The nature of both is an ongoing process, always becoming, always in between. There is no final destination on the Internet. There are, rather, always other links to journey along and other sites to travel to. Likewise, in diaspora, 'homecoming' is unrealizable. The Internet and diaspora defer.

Paradoxically, homeland is the dilemma of the diaspora. While the diasporic discourse is grounded on the return to the homeland, forging an imaginary homeland is the primary project of the diaspora. The Internet might be a challenge to this dilemma. While 'return' does not seem to be realized by Iranians in diaspora, 'virtual return' has become a reality for many of them. Iranians have found a homeland in the homepages. ◆

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