Tehran's Soundscape as a Contested Public Sphere: Blurring the Lines between Public and Private

A cacophony of horns, the sound of the ‘azan (prayer call) from minarets, dance music blaring from passing SUVs, broken sounds of a street musician's fiddle, hip-hop emanating from a small shop, drivers shouting curses at one another, the signature tune of a radio news programme puncturing the air from a taxi parked curbside, a megaphone from a pick-up truck calling for scrap metal, pop diva Homeyra's tantalizing cadences soaring above the street noise from a car stuck in traffic, echoing a bygone era, Islamic prayers from a multi-coloured shrine on the sidewalk honouring a recently deceased, the frantic whistles of a traffic officer … these are some of the sounds that come to mind when I think of Tehran's soundscape. It is chaotic and diverse, and represents the multitude of public and private threads that make up the city's auditory fabric.

Although the public sphere is policed according to the governing bodies' ideology, political interests and standards of morality, Tehran's soundscape is a living, vibrant demonstration of how individuals are able to invade the public aural arena via semi-private spaces and to stretch the bounds of the public space with insertions of the private, creating a public soundscape that is contested and heterogeneous. The politicization of all aspects of life in the Islamic Republic has created an environment in which individuals often take positions – in minute and subtle ways – that give them some control over the construction of their own subjectivities within the pervasive authoritarian context. This, I argue, has meant that rather than contributing to a greater bifurcation of the public and private spheres into two separate realms, as is often claimed, the circumstances have given rise to a public sphere imbued to a considerable extent by that which is not supposed to be public, and a private sphere that is heavily coloured by the public/political concerns of daily life. Within this realm, music has been especially instrumental in blurring the lines.

Defining terms – Private vs. Public

Before continuing with a discussion about the blurring of the public–private binary, it is useful to attempt to define the terms "private" and "public" in the Iranian context.

Because of the state's forceful incursion into private spaces and its appropriation of the public sphere, it is tempting to discount the existence of any real private sphere or, vice versa, to describe everything as
*andaruni* (the inside area in traditional Iranian architecture that secludes women even further within the home), as Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi has done, describing the public sphere as a metropolitan *andaruni* where behaviour (in particular women's) is strictly controlled under the guise of protection.¹

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As Hannah Arendt has argued, a central aim of an authoritarian political system is to limit the private sphere, and in a more blatant form of Foucault's panopticon – which in his analysis applies to all modern states, not only authoritarian ones – to monitor and discipline all aspects of citizens' lives.² But regarding everything as a metropolitan *andaruni*, and extending the private sphere all the way from the innermost domestic space to the streets of Tehran, prevents us from seeking definitions that could more clearly delineate the nuances of these spheres. What is entailed in the "private" and what do we call "public"? Do all aspects of private, social and political life fall neatly within one of the registers of this binary?

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Strictly – and physically – speaking, the private sphere encompasses the domestic sphere, and within this sphere the *andaruni* exists in more traditional households. More loosely, the private includes functions where all those who attend are invitees. Beyond this, the private entails such semi-private spaces as cars, very small shops, and the personal space around individual bodies in public spaces.

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In Islam, Mohsen Kadivar writes, "The terms 'private' and 'public' ... occur neither in the Qur’an nor the traditions conveyed from the prophets and the imams. Islamic jurisprudence does not recognize these terms either." Kadivar goes on to explain that the available literature on Islam assigns three meanings to the word "private," namely, that which is personal or exclusive to the person, that which one would rather keep concealed and protected from others, and that over which the individual should exercise exclusive authority and control.³ These terms are relatively undefined, but give a sense that there is a wide latitude for what the private can include in an Islamic framework.

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In a political sense, the private also embraces opinions and acts that are not publicly tolerated – basically all that James C. Scott calls the "hidden transcript." In contrast to the "public transcript," which is authorized by the dominant power, "every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a 'hidden transcript' that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant."⁴ Politically, the "hidden transcript" is that which

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¹ See Amir-Ebrahimi, Masserat, "Conquering Enclosed Public Spaces", in *Cities*, vol. 23 (2006), no. 6.
³ See Kadivar, Mohsen, "An Introduction to the Public and Private Debate in Islam", in *Social Research*, vol. 70 (2003), no. 3.
most people readily know but cannot express freely outside the private sphere without some risk.\textsuperscript{5}

On the other side, then, public spaces are those spaces outside the domestic sphere whose purpose is for public use and interaction. Public activities include the interactions between private individuals that take place within the public realm or are for public use or purpose. So, for example, tutorials or classes between teachers and students, even within a private home, can be defined as public and have public ramifications if problems should ensue that are of public concern. Commercial transactions between private individuals are public and will be regulated by the public legal system should there be disagreements or theft. Relations between people and state authorities are also public.

However, the parameters of the "public" and the "private" are conditioned within the current Iranian context – as Nazih Ayubi has argued for Arab societies – by the government's view of ethics as a collective and not a private matter.\textsuperscript{6} Islamic governments often see it as within their remit to intervene in people's private spheres such as personal clothing and individual conduct within the public sphere, and even their domestic spheres. During Iran's early post-revolutionary decades, state auxiliaries regularly raided private homes on suspicion of alcohol consumption or the possession of "illicit" entertainment material. But as Kadivar shows in his article examining the barriers between public and private, Islam and its legal system, the Shariah, attach great importance to individual privacy, even maintaining that sins committed in private – as long as there is no harm to others – should not be declared publicly and can be repented of privately to God. There is an oft-repeated anecdote about the second Caliph, Umar bin Khattab, who peeked into a private home, witnessed a sin and started admonishing the man inside. The man responded that if he had committed one sin, the Caliph had committed three, namely, looking into a private home, investigating another person's fault, and entering a private home without permission. The Caliph is said to have asked for forgiveness and left. The sanctity of the private sphere is highlighted in this story.\textsuperscript{7}

On the other hand, the Islamic principle of "Commanding Good and Forbidding Evil" requires all Muslims to speak out against wrong acts in the public sphere, and even to oppose such acts physically if necessary. Hence, while great value is attached to the right to privacy, there is a strong demarcation between the private

\textsuperscript{5} Based on Jürgen Habermas's analysis, the private also includes the private interests of special groups. The interests of civil society – those segments of the population that engage in the public sphere for higher collective causes – can be categorized as private until they become recognized as public, as a result of their magnitude and reach. These groups work to bring that which may be considered private or special interests into the public realm. See Habermas, Jürgen, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (Cambridge, MA, 1991).

\textsuperscript{6} See Ayubi, Nazih, "Rethinking the Public/Private Dichotomy: Radical Islamism and Civil Society in the Middle East", in Contention, vol. 4 (1995), no. 3.

\textsuperscript{7} See Kadivar: (see FN 3), 668.
and public spheres. As soon as a person is in public, his or her behaviour affects the public, and personal privacy is no longer warranted.

With the institutionalization of political Islam under the Islamic Republic, the state began not only to police citizens based on its interpretation of Islamic edicts, but also on any matter that concerned its revolutionary ideology. In attempting to create "good Islamic citizens", it trespassed (and sometimes still does) into people's private spheres, which is not justified by Islamic edicts. From the very beginning, the Islamic Republic also took steps to systematically police the public sphere, purportedly according to its interpretations of Islam. Although special forces known as "morality police" and other groups such as the Basij Force of the Revolutionary Guard have carried out "moralizing" functions, in late 2004 the Headquarters for Commanding Good and Forbidding Evil was established with the aim of doing more of the same. Since then, various lawmakers have tried to enhance its responsibilities, and more alarmingly, to extend its duties to regular citizens. In the summer of 2011, the Director of the Headquarters announced that it had 70,000 members (private citizens) who were ready to command good and forbid evil. In April 2015, parliament even signed a law supporting those citizens who take it upon themselves to do this. This came after a summer when at least eight women became victims of acid attacks in Isfahan. Many suspected the attackers to be vigilantes empowered by politicians who argued that commanding good and forbidding evil is every Muslim's responsibility.\(^8\)

Amir-Ebrahimi has used the term "enclosed public sphere" and noted that the state's appropriation of the public sphere, especially during the strict 1980s, meant that public spaces became synonymous with the state's revolutionary space. The state monopolized these spaces for the promulgation of its strict ideology and the enforcement of its decrees, while traditionally more private spaces, such as people's homes and basements, became the places where more of the once "public" events – such as religious and secular jalasehs (thematic meetings), book clubs, fashion shows, music concerts etc. – were held. Then, during the reconstruction period of the early to mid-1990s, the government launched a programme to create public spaces for leisure, and some of those activities began to take place in the officially sanctioned public sphere. Hence, we see that the definitions of these spaces have not remained constant, and that there has been some fluidity between them.

Still, the official public sphere is quite clearly delineated because the boundaries of the permissible are more or less known to most Iranians. Two powerful promulgators of official norms are state media and the Friday prayer leaders, as well, of course, as the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself. Pronouncements

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and policies of the sitting president, his ministers, and members of the Majles can also function as purveyors of the acceptable, but this is more often the case with powerful hardline or conservative governments, ministers or parliamentarians whose views are closer to those of the Supreme Leader. For example, criticism of the Supreme Leader or the appearance of unveiled female Iranian actors is unthinkable on state television. But both of these, and many other incidents that would be unacceptable to the Islamic Republic, regularly take place on expatriate satellite TV channels that are watched by millions of Iranians inside Iran. This points to the existence of a parallel public sphere.

Since the mid-2000s, in fact, a new alternative public sphere has developed thanks to new media technology, most importantly mobile phones, satellite television channels and the Internet. In this new reality one can speak of two public spheres: an officially overseen (although never fully controlled) public sphere and an alternative public sphere based on new media technology, which is deeply entrenched in both older and newer Iranian expatriate communities abroad.

This alternative public sphere is almost like a big national “private” sphere, where conversations take place on mass levels on mobile phones, satellite TV programmes and the Internet, beyond the jurisdiction of the state’s approved register. Even if one does not personally participate in the Internet and satellite TV mediascape, noteworthy occurrences on these freer channels are sometimes reported in conventional media (usually the press) and are often talked about in informal conversations even between perfect strangers. The state understands the significance of this alternative public sphere and tries to shut down communication channels at times of heightened political crisis by disrupting mobile phone networks and satellite TV broadcasts and by shutting down the Internet.

Both the new media and the various tactics of inserting the “private” into public spaces have greatly expanded the actual public sphere as a forum for the presentation and deliberation of ideas and opinions. These freer spaces have, over the last decade, allowed for “public declarations of the hidden transcript,” which have played an important role in “fragmenting and contesting political and religious authority” to a degree that was previously impossible.9

Within this larger, multifaceted public sphere, which encompasses both state-controlled and non-controlled spaces and media and a wide area between these registers, music plays a particularly important role in facilitating a “national conversation” outside of official parameters. Music is essential both in the creation of

9 See Eickelman, Dale and Salvatore, Armando, “The Public Sphere and Muslim Identities”, in Archives européennes de sociologie, vol. 43 (2002).
these alternative discursive spaces and in the construction and performance of identity among Iranian youth. Music's capacity to function in this polyvalent form whereby its messages can be interpreted in a multitude of ways is instrumental to its role as a political medium. Or, in the words of Marcello Sorce Keller, music has the "uncanny potential to attract, catch, and collect symbolic meanings of various kinds in a magnet-like fashion."  

**Why Music Matters**

Music's importance has been for its intrinsic qualities, as well as for its history and social use in Iran.

A consequence of the Islamic government's fraught relationship to music has been to imbue this particular art form with greater political signification, so that often its presence alone or a person's participation in particular expressions of it can project certain meanings, index a certain attitude, or construct a social or political position. Michel de Certeau calls some of these tactics the "weapons of the weak." For example, taking part in the discourse of a certain musician by quoting certain lines from his work can in itself signal political association. Or "imposing" in your taxi the music of a pre-revolutionary pop diva on the one hand or Quranic recitation on the other can signal political and religious alignment, although these markers are not necessarily permanent. Identity and subjectivity are fluid and can take on different forms depending on all sorts of variables, including social and political context. A taxi driver who drinks arak at night and listens to the music of the "los anjelesi" sex bomb Sepideh will do neither of those things in the privacy of his own home if he is visited by a religious relative, and is likely to switch off the music in his car if he picks up a passenger who looks like a diehard regime supporter with the potential to cause trouble.

As the state's stance toward music – and hence to the official musical space – has evolved over the decades, the significations of participation in it have also evolved. Whereas some families once considered it haram – forbidden by Islamic law – to attend any live or recorded music at all, their attendance now at a state-approved singer's concert can actually represent support for the current official state ideology, while a youngster's attendance at an "underground" rock concert signifies a more open attitude that diverges from the state's framework on a whole range of issues.

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Second, the medium of music is itself a major contributing factor to its flexible and manifold uses by cultural producers and "secondary producers" alike – following de Certeau's designation of consumers as the "other" producers. Because of "music's location between the real and fictional, serious and sarcastic, musical mediation provides a wider space for expression than even verbal discourse or behaviour," and can express a sentiment at a lower risk than, say, explicit verbal communication. At presidential candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi's largest campaign event in Azadi Stadium on 23 May 2009, for example, a song with communist connotations, "Aftabkaran" (lit. sun-workers), was revived largely to project a feeling of hope, because the song augurs the end of winter. But it also instantly communicated a certain forgiveness toward all those Iranians who had been punished by the Revolution for their political persuasions. It signalled a "let's move on" and "let bygones be bygones" attitude even to the Islamists' arch-enemies – the communists – something that no politician could have actually said in so many or even fewer words, but that music was able to communicate.

Third, and quite importantly, music is the most inclusive and salient of all the arts as a communal discursive space, for the following reasons: music is present in the lives of most Iranians, whether they listen to its officially approved forms on state radio, tune in to foreign-based Persian satellite television channels for both foreign and home-grown productions, or listen to a random variety of melodies on public transport vehicles such as the shared taxis, where drivers play music to their heart's delight, from pre-revolutionary pop to current hip-hop. In addition, music is more accessible to Iranians than film and theatre, both of which require, at minimum, time for their viewing whereas music can be listened to throughout the day and along with other activities. Music is also more affordable. In 2011, it was still possible to purchase for 1,000 tomans (approximately US$1) from street peddlers a CD with a medley of more than 100 MP3 tracks. Some of the peddlers function as disc jockeys for the neighbourhood or the entire town and select and burn the tracks themselves.

Fourth, concerts allow for a communal sharing of critical views and the coming together of a critical
discursive community that cannot be created elsewhere in the official public sphere. As Walter Benjamin pointed out in his comparison between painting and film, "painting simply is in no position to present an object for simultaneous collective experience," while music more than any other art form allows that experience.\(^\text{17}\) Similarly, Walter Ong notes that "sight isolates, sound incorporates. Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer," enabling a kind of communion between performers and audiences as well as among audiences that no other art form really achieves in this intrinsic, sonic form.\(^\text{18}\) Hence, "by contrast with vision, the dissecting sense, sound is thus a unifying sense."\(^\text{19}\) However, this is not to negate the multisensory dimension of sound – and by extension, of music – as well as its necessarily social construction.\(^\text{20}\) It is simply to argue for music's ability, more than any other art form in Iran, to create a popular collective experience. The public concert in contemporary Iran (and to a lesser extent the theatrical performance) is the only type of officially permitted entertainment event that brings together a self-organized public and allows for the spontaneity of live action both on stage and among the audience. Gatherings around music are also potent because they are founded on Iran's long-standing cultural engagement with the embodied sense of sound, rooted in its traditional cultivation and love of poetry as the master sonic form. Poetry finds its strongest form of mass mediation through music, which is able to magnify its impact to larger social scales.

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Fifth, musical mediation is possible in the small spaces over which people have direct control even within officially overseen public spaces; the small spaces that flow into and expand the alternative public sphere, such as shops, taxi cabs, and the very personal space that can be coloured through the humming of a controversial tune or lyric. Blaring the song "Aftabkaran" (the leftist song used by the Mousavi campaign) through your car windows at a time of intense political dispute following the 2009 elections, for example, creates a very clear political positioning, and the act also mitigates the state's control over the official public sphere.

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Last but not least, while we invest music with this great capacity to convey universal truths, we also – paradoxically – don't accord it the same weight or importance as we would other forms of political communication, such as a political speech, a newspaper editorial or an actual protest. Hence, music is somewhat "unburdened," and as such, is freer to function in important ways.


\(^{19}\) Ong: (see FN 18).

\(^{20}\) Ong has been criticized for ascribing "physiological, psychological, and phenomenological characteristics" to listening, which ignore important issues of context and agency. See Sterne, Jonathan, "A Machine to Hear for Them: On the very Possibility of Sound's Reproduction" in *Cultural Studies*, vol. 15 (2001).
Tehran's Soundscape as a Contested Public Sphere

From the above discussion it is clear how music enables alternative positions to be inserted into the public sphere, or for the private to be inserted into the public. It also shows how Tehran's soundscape blurs any stark demarcation between these spheres. There are two principal processes by which this can take place. One is the consumers' use of music, including enactments of repertoires of contention for certain political position-takings, and the other is producers' use of certain themes for their music, or other tactics of encroachment on the official public sphere. Thus the agency for pushing the boundaries can arise from producers or secondary producers, namely the consumers. Of course, state or religious authorities also leave an imprint on Tehran's soundscape, but our concern will be the ways in which people in private capacities puncture the official public sphere with insinuations of the private.

In 2010, a very popular rendering of a religious prayer became the battleground on which cultural officials waged their political wars, and a contentious public responded. Iran's best known vocalist of Persian classical music, Mohammad Reza Shajarian, had been the voice behind a Ramadan prayer, "Rabbana", which is similar to the Christian Lord's Prayer. For all but the youngest of Iranians, even secular ones, "Rabbana" is a very powerful nostalgic prayer that makes associations with dusk and the breaking of the fast, and has been broadcast daily from all television and radio channels and mosques in Iran during the month of Ramadan since 1979. A generally popular artist, probably best described as an icon, Shajarian acquired even greater popularity during the 2009 political unrest because of his stand against the government's violence towards protesters. The government retaliated against him and his supporters by banning the broadcast of his recording of the "Rabbana". Following the ban in 2010, Shajarian supporters, as well as all those who opposed the state's ban on political or personal grounds, criticized the government in the press and in online forums. The popular Musiqi-ye Ma website was representative not only in its sentiment that "the moments of iftar this year don't have the same aura thanks to radio and television officials," but also in posting an audio file of Shajarian's "Rabbana" for download.21 Indeed, while spending time in Iran during Ramadan in 2011, I observed iftar in several households where family members switched off state television and played this piece from their audio equipment, a practice that I learned was widespread among other fasters, too. In fact, the act had become such a "repertoire of contention" – to quote Charles Tilly – that even people who had never fasted in their lives played the piece.22 When they did this in public, in their stores or taxi cabs or other public places, they inserted their officially disapproved personal views into the public sphere. Vice versa, when they played it in their homes and inner private spaces, they brought the public into their private spheres. In this way many Iranians actively took sides in a national

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22 Charles Tilly develops this concept in his work. See, for example, "Contentious Politics and Social Change", in African Studies, vol. 56, no. 1 (1997).
conversation, depending on their political positions.

Another example is a song by the rapper Soroush Lashkary, aka Hichkas. "Ekhtelaf" (Inequality, in this context) struck a chord with Tehranis, and Hichkas became so widely known after the release of this song in 2006 that one of its lines – "Inja Tehran-e" (This here is Tehran) – was picked up and became a signature phrase that encapsulated all that the song states about the city. In the internationally screened film, No One Knows About Persian Cats, Hichkas performs the song against a backdrop of homeless people and poverty-stricken workers and children. The song begins with an ominous melody and an insider's voice who is there to set the record straight about the city, which despite three decades of a self-professed justice-seeking government is a "jungle" where you either eat or are eaten, and where class disparity is so extreme that it "wounds people's souls and makes them sick." Here are some of its lyrics:

This here is Tehran, a city where Everything that you see in it causes provocation Provoking the soul all the way to the garbage bin Until you finally get it that you too are garbage, not a human being Here all are wolves, you want to be like a lamb? Let me open your eyes and ears a bit This here is Tehran you damn fool, it's no joke Forget about flowers and popsicles This here is the jungle, dog eat dog Here half the people have hang-ups, the other half are savages Here class disparity is out of control.

The refrain calls on God to wake up and answer for this state:

God wake up! I've got several years' worth of stuff to talk to you about God wake up, wake up! Don't be mad at me … God wake up! I'm a piece of garbage that needs to talk to you.

During my years of research in Tehran I witnessed people several times murmuring the opening line of the song "Inja Tehran-e ya'ni shahri ke" as a phrase that signified several things: first, that the person was part of the conversation of cultural goods that were circulated outside of the government's radar – such as underground music, satellite television programmes and other video material – and hence participated in the alternative public sphere; second, that the person approved of the structural existence of this alternative public sphere; and third, that he/she agreed with the description of Tehran conveyed in this song, which at a

23 See here for a video of "Ekhtelaf" with English subtitles: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuVJyx7W-Fc (accessed 1 October 2015).

minimum means that the Islamic Republic has failed to bring about the kind of society that it had promised. The most public forum in which I heard this phrase was at a public celebration by state television of Imam Mahdi’s birthday, in the Bustan-e Azadegan Park in southeast Tehran in July 2011. On stage, a contest was run where men from the audience would volunteer to sing a segment of a song and spectators would choose a winner. One of the men had barely finished saying “Inja Tehran-e” when his microphone was cut off and he was sent off stage. The episode showed the authorities’ sensitivity toward this song, which is not even directly or explicitly critical of the government. But both its format – rap – as well as its content are not tolerated by state regulating bodies. However, even within that very brief snatch of song, the man on the stage took a political position, and in an official spectacle watched by hundreds of people there and hundreds of thousands on live television, he pointed to the alternative public sphere that is repressed and unrepresented on state television. Another Hichkas song, “Yeh Ruz-e Khub Miyad” (A good day will come) – written in an oblique but potent criticism of the government’s handling of the 2009 unrest – played a similar role in that its refrain ultimately promised a day when the current conditions and those in power who created them would no longer exist. Again, the phrase “A good day will come” fulfilled a similar function to “This here is Tehran.”

In 2010, when the political situation in the country was still very tense and activists were calling for political mobilization online and a physical presence in protests, in a period of extreme despair for many people who had staked high hopes in the 2009 elections, there appeared on state radio a joyous song titled “Hamechi Arumeh” (Everything is calm). The songwriter, Hamid Talebzadeh, complained that for years he had not managed to obtain permits for his albums and had been considered a lost cause by producers. He has since emigrated to Tehrangeles, as the expatriate Iranian scene in Los Angeles is called, and has been very successful. Although state authorities never granted him an album permit, they picked up this song from his works and broadcast it ad nauseam on state media. Its main lyrics are:

   Everything is calm …
   How happy I am!
   I pride myself, you are now with me …
   How lucky I am!
   Everything is calm …
   Everything is calm …
   My sorrows have disappeared.

This was at best a clumsy effort and at worst an insulting trick by state authorities to inject lightness and hope into a heavily depressed public sphere. Instantly, people converted the song’s title into a cynical phrase

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25 See here for a link to YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQj_B9TkEBc (accessed 1 October 2015).
26 See here for the music video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t17-9j7EH7w (accessed 1 October 2015).
that they exchanged in greetings in order to indicate their awareness of the state’s amateurish attempts to project happiness and calm into the public sphere. In repeating the phrase mockingly, they used it in a practice of re-signification to signal that they belonged to the dissenting public for whom precisely the opposite was true; namely, that there was no calm and quiet.

Thus, just as music producers and consumers insert their positions into the public sphere via playing certain songs or injecting particular phrases and turning them into repertoires of contention, the state too makes its attempts to influence the city’s soundscape and Iran’s official mediascape. For a long time this meant blaring Islamic prayers from mosques and playing religious or march music on its radio and television channels, but in the last two decades the state has also made use of cheerful, but vacuous dance pop music that attracts a large number of youth.

As mentioned, another significant mode through which the alternative public sphere is expanded is when producers extend the communal conversation by, among other tactics, choosing topics that have been off limits in the public sphere, forbidden not only by the state but also often by social mores and customs. This of course can happen within any art form, but music is particularly powerful because it permeates life in a way that no other art form does, and magnified by mass mediation, it has taken on the role that poetry and rhymes once occupied among Iranians.

The wide currency in the expression of taboo subjects has only become possible because of new media technology and the development of an alternative public sphere. Musicians no longer rely on permits from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Ershad) in order to publicize their work. Consumers can easily download their music online, listen to it on expatriate radio or television channels, or purchase it cheaply on the Iranian black market. While a musician like Mohammad Reza Shajarian was once able to use the medium of the public concert to subtly inject critique against the government by utilizing the nuances of classical Persian poetry, younger musicians’ more explicit critiques rely on new media technology for their distribution. Musicians have seized this opportunity to express critique and even direct insult against some of the established sanctities of the Islamic Republic, such as God, religiosity, and the Supreme Leader. They have also used this medium to expand the public discourse by singing about taboo subjects such as sex, homosexuality, prostitution and official corruption. By highlighting such topics, producers carry out what Bayat has called "quiet encroachment", which he has used in a different and more specifically economic context of the behaviour of marginalized (in our context, politically repressed) people whose everyday actions keep expanding their territory into the spheres of state power.27

Bayat argues that in order to assert their identities, the youth often utilize "what looks like 'accommodating' strategies, which nevertheless can be transformative", as they use "dominant norms and institutions to accommodate their youthful claims, but in doing so they creatively redefine and subvert the constraints of those codes and norms."

This he calls "subversive accommodation," such as when young Iranians turn austere Muharram processions into "Hossein parties". This concept is in line with Dick Hebdige's previously developed notion of "subversive practices" whereby "mods," for example, appropriate the conventional establishment clothing – the business suit – and strip it of its original connotations.

The ways in which the musicians and their audiences insert themselves into the public sphere and traverse the space between "public" and "private" – thereby increasingly widening the parameters of the "public transcript" – often lie in these subtle subversive acts of creating new meanings.

One of the strictest controls imposed on music in the public realm in post-revolutionary Iran has been on the solo female voice. This ban in 1979 constituted a sharp rupture for Iranian music, considering that some of modern Iran's all-time most popular singers have been women. For nearly two decades, the female voice was completely banished to the private sphere. Around the turn of the millennium, officials decided to permit the female voice within all-female public concerts, in effect creating a private space or andaruni within the public realm. While these concerts are well attended, they still do little to infringe on the state's ban on the female voice in the official public sphere. But in recent years, female musicians have made strides and managed to create a more "public" public presence for themselves, not just as instrumentalists, but also as vocalists. In October 2014, a young vocalist by the name of Mahdiyeh Mohammadkhani made headlines that read, "Last night, for the first time in 34 years, an Iranian woman sang in concert."

Women have been background singers for many years, but in this particular concert Mohammadkhani sang solo in one of Tehran's main performance halls, Talar-e Vahdat, in a building right next to the government's music oversight office. Then in January 2015, a CD was published that was technically sung by a man and woman duo, but in effect, the voice of the woman (Noooshin Tafi) – whose image is the only one on the CD cover – was much more dominant. In small but significant ways, the women's restricted andaruni within the public sphere, deemed by the authorities as the only appropriate place for them, is breaking into the official public sphere. This process has been helped not only by the agency of the producers behind these events, but also because the domain of the culturally and socially acceptable in the official public sphere lags far behind that not only of the alternative public sphere, but also of the private sphere.

28 Bayat and Herrera: (see FN 14), 18.
Conclusion

The producer and consumer tactics that I have described above are actions that de Certeau has termed "tactics" or "weapons of the weak." While I agree with this metaphor, it is no longer apt within the Iranian context to call the wielders "weak", because – thanks to new media technology – the power of these weapons have been magnified many times over. These actors may be weak in that as long as they don't consent to official discourse, they are unable to exercise freedom of expression in the official public sphere or agitate for tangible political change in the short term. But as the Green Movement and the recent revived activism towards the election of Hassan Rouhani have shown, these activities allow both for a "representational site" as well as a "representation of site", where the participants' ideals and aspirations for a more open and pluralistic public space are expressed through the physical exercise of those ideals. Ultimately, these create networks that can have tangible results, such as the election of a more moderate candidate four years after the repressed Green Movement.²¹

Iran's expanded public sphere, empowered by some of the technologies and tactics discussed here, opens up new political opportunities. I hope to have shown that music, both for its intrinsic qualities and its creative use by a diverse set of actors, plays an important role in this process.

About the Author:

Nahid Siamdoust, New York University

Nahid Siamdoust is currently a research scholar at the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University. She obtained her doctorate from the University of Oxford in 2013. Her forthcoming book from Stanford University Press, titled "The Politics of Music in Iran," examines the field of music as a politically charged public sphere in Iran. It is based on her dissertation, which won the “best dissertation award” from both the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies and The Middle East Studies Association of America in 2014. She holds a B.A. in Political Science and Art History, and a Master's in International Affairs – both from Columbia University. Nahid has worked as a full-time Iran and Middle East based journalist for Der Spiegel, TIME Magazine, and Al Jazeera English TV, among others. Her academic research focuses on the intersection between politics, culture and media (music included) in Iran and the wider Middle East.