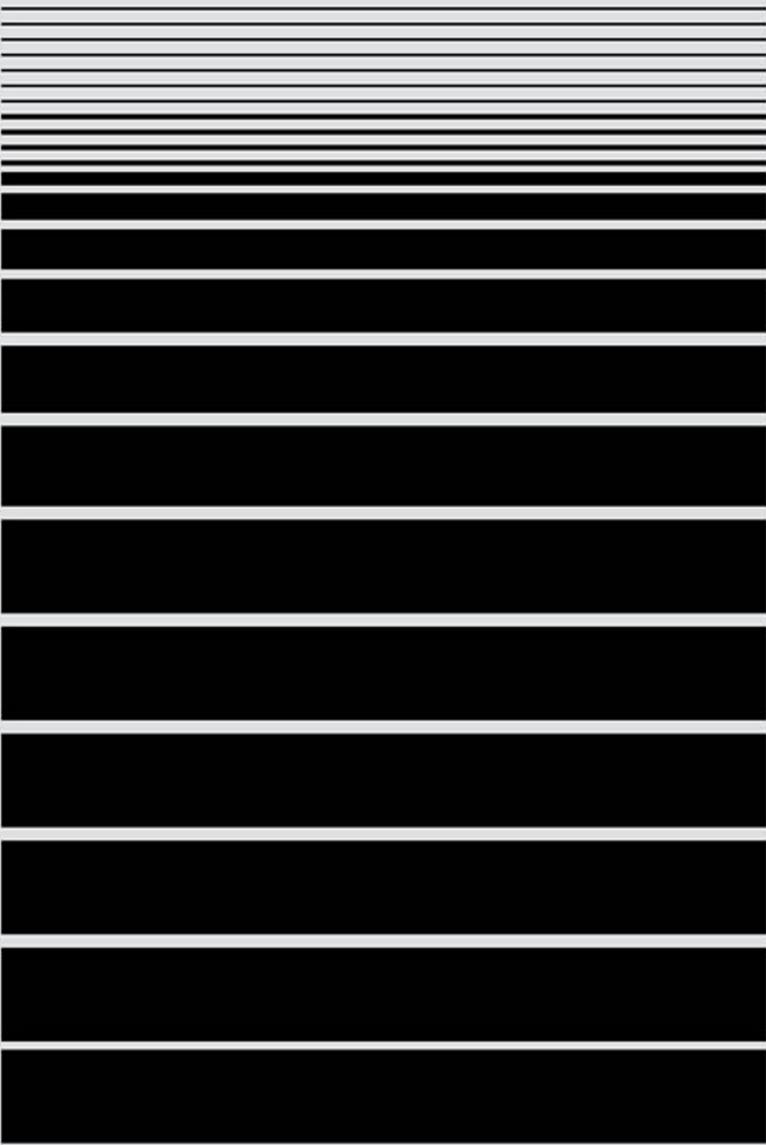


The Secret Life of Videocassettes in Iran



UNDERGROUND

Blake Atwood

UNDERGROUND

INFRASTRUCTURES SERIES

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UNDERGROUND

THE SECRET LIFE OF VIDEOCASSETTES IN IRAN

BLAKE ATWOOD

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For Jinping Wang, who taught me to write.

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INTRODUCTION: THE CURIOUS CASE OF VIDEO IN IRAN

The story of the American videocassette has been told and retold. It is the story of how one film industry tamed the beast. The earliest adopters of home video in the mid-1970s hacked the technology, pushing it to extremes in order to record, collect, and circulate movies informally.¹ A decade later, however, the American film industry was making most of its profits from the sale of movies on videocassette rather than ticket sales.² Hollywood used the videocassette to turn movies into commodities that could be shopped for, browsed, and procured like any other consumer product.³ This process was neither quick nor easy. It played out over several years through court battles, shifting corporate agendas, and the proliferation of franchises like Blockbuster Video.⁴ Once home video technology was subsumed under the formal operations of Hollywood distribution, the practices and moral debates that foregrounded the issue of access quickly faded into the background for most Americans. In the end, Hollywood was resilient—as it so often has been.

But the story of video is not the same everywhere, and each place had to contend with this unruly medium on its own terms. Outside of the United States, the beast was not always so easily tamed. In the global story of video, *informal* industries, labor, and practices often reigned supreme.⁵ As a result, everyday users continually came up against the legal, ethical, and practical dimensions of what it meant to access movies. This was especially true in Iran. In 1983, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) issued a ban on the personal use of all video technology, just as a burgeoning video rental industry found its footing in the country. The ban would last for over a decade. At the very moment when much of the world experienced the rise of video as a medium, videocassettes and players could not exist legally in Iran. It would be wrong, however, to assume that the absence of a legal framework for video meant that movies on video were inaccessible, a niche hobby, or a cult interest. On the contrary, by the time the MCIG lifted

the ban in 1994, an expansive informal system ensured that millions of videocassettes were already circulating efficiently and widely throughout the country.

The video ban set the stage for the incredible tale of how everyday Iranians nurtured an underground world of videocassettes. Even without a formal industry to provide them with prerecorded content on video, Iranians found their way to the movies. Or perhaps better put, they welcomed the movies into their homes. They broke the law and risked their safety to gain access to sights and sounds that would have otherwise remained out of reach. The underground distribution network that developed equipped people with a diverse stock of movies on video—everything from contemporary Hollywood action movies and European art films to popular Indian musicals and midcentury Iranian melodramas. In other words, videocassettes provided access to everything that could not be found in the state-sponsored film and television industries at the time. Video dealers with briefcases full of videocassettes moved quietly through city streets and delivered videos for rent to their customers. Selecting and watching movies from the video dealer's collection was often a family affair, as videocassettes transformed the television set from simply a source of news and information to a movie screen capable of nearly anything. Although the emerging video industry of the early 1980s had been the luxury of an elite few, by the time the ministry lifted the ban in the mid-1990s, home video technology had spread to nearly every imaginable corner of the country.

How do we account for such an astonishing development, especially given the legal and material restraints of video technology at the time? Why and how did everyday Iranians operate outside of the formal state apparatus in order to circulate movies on video? What did it mean to participate in the underground distribution of this new medium? What kinds of social, cultural, and political forces determined the movement of movies on video? The video culture that developed in the 1980s and 1990s was part and parcel of other transformations in Iran. At a time when society negotiated and renegotiated public and private life in the Islamic Republic, the circulation of videocassettes accomplished two things. First, the underground distribution network helped demarcate the ever-shifting boundaries between private and public spaces under the country's new political order. While the government viewed almost every space as public and, therefore, regulatable, people fought to maintain private lives that they shielded from the state. Within

these conditions, videocassettes played an important role in clarifying which spaces were risky for carrying out activities the state did not condone, as the tapes literally moved between public and private spaces. Second, videocassettes engendered an infrastructure for media distribution and consumption in the 1980s and 1990s that existed outside the domain of state regulation. In other words, home video technology settled media access as a uniquely *informal* set of practices in Iran. If scholarship often imagines Iran as a site of unforgiving regulation, surveillance, and discipline, then much less attention has been paid to porous, slippery, and informal media practices that form networks, bundle people together, and provide leisure and entertainment where it otherwise wouldn't exist.⁶

The underground world of video teaches us as media scholars a great deal about how people build vibrant cultures *beneath* repressive institutions. Media technologies play an important role in the construction of such underworlds—but often in unexpected ways. In this story, *how* videocassettes circulated mattered just as much as the sights and sounds that they delivered. It was not just that Iranians gained access to banned movie content but also that people developed and sustained an expansive infrastructure that disseminated video. They forged routes, acquired technical knowledge, broke the law, and created rituals by passing and trading hard, plastic videocassettes. It would be easy to dismiss this underground system as a neutral channel for media distribution. But such a view would overlook the fact that it was actually a rich site upon which people constructed and enacted ambivalent subjectivities in relation to the state. The government's blanket ban on video technology did little to foreclose the medium or diminish its value. On the contrary, the state's attempt to control video forged entirely new ways to engage with it.

HISTORIES OF AN UNRULY MEDIUM

The global rise of video technology coincided with an extraordinary period in Iranian history. Three remarkable events—a revolution, the establishment of a new government, and a violent war with neighboring Iraq—unfolded in tandem and would together define the trajectory of video technology in the country. First, in early 1979, the world watched in awe as a populist revolution ousted the shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. For over a year prior, political unrest had challenged the monarchy, as different activist

networks—including communists, Islamists, and constitutionalists—joined together in protest. Over the course of the previous decade, the shah had isolated and disenfranchised almost every social and political class in Iran with heavy-handed policies, the usurping of complete political power, and severe policing institutions. The increasingly violent protests came to a head on January 16, 1979, when the shah and his family, confronted with the inevitable, boarded a plane, never to return again. What followed was a period of uncertainty. Against all odds, the people had triumphed over the shah's police state. Anything seemed possible. It was both an exhilarating and a frightening time.

The Iranian revolution—like most revolutions—operated according to a logic of informality. It rejected the state's formal institutions, including film and broadcast media. It therefore contributed to the establishment of an informal space that would help videocassette technology thrive and also come to define it. At the center of the revolution was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a Shi'a cleric who articulated a rhetoric of revolution that centered on anti-imperialism, socialist principles, and the political importance of Islam. It is something of a contradiction to claim that Khomeini was at the center of the revolution since he was in exile in France at the time, far away from the events. Nevertheless, his voice and his ideas spread like wildfire throughout Iran, igniting people's spirits and calling them to action. It was the proliferation of consumer media technologies and their informal protocols that made this possible. Specifically, audiocassette recorders and printers allowed sermons and speeches to circulate widely in the country. Cassette tapes of Khomeini's speeches and pamphlets with his ideas—often copies of copies—provided a counternarrative to the state-controlled radio and television stations.⁷ The tapes and pamphlets showed how everyday people could mobilize consumer technologies to determine the distribution of their own media content.

The exuberant period of uncertainty following the revolution was short lived. Two and a half months after the revolution's success, a new government was born. In the interim, Ayatollah Khomeini had returned to Iran and assumed a *de facto* position of leadership. He set in motion a new form of governance that he called the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist. Unlike the shah's monarchy, this was a constitutional government with a Shi'a cleric at its helm. In late March, the Iranian people gathered in polling stations to vote on a referendum to formalize Khomeini's theories of

governance. According to official statistics, the referendum passed with an astonishing 98.2 percent of voters in favor—a figure still contested today. On April 1, 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran was established with Khomeini officially in charge.

The establishment of the Islamic Republic not only ushered in political transformation; it also marked a shift in cultural and social life. The new government sought to reestablish order and consolidate its power by controlling formal media institutions, especially film and broadcast media. And yet the creation of a new government did not constitute an abrupt rupture. The new regime could not simply overhaul the country's cultural policies overnight, which meant that citizens were left in the dark about which aspects of cultural life were acceptable or even legal under the new regime. It took the new government three years to establish the MCIG, leaving home video technology partially unregulated for quite some time. The ban on video that would come in 1983 was part of the larger attempt to control media in the country. Thus, for years the circulation of videocassettes flourished as an informal practice, operating in unclear legal territory, as the government struggled to articulate, determine, and enforce its formal cultural policies.

The uneven development of media policies and institutions was on par with other changes at the time. As a new government, the Islamic Republic wanted to make sure that its citizens fell in line with its totalizing ideology, and so it exerted its power into all aspects of daily life. It tried to dictate people's religiosity, to control what they could wear, watch, and consume, and to determine how they could socialize. The state claimed all power, but its laws and policies were often unclear and sometimes even unwritten. Worse yet, the enforcement of rules proved inconsistent, with punishments grossly disproportionate to the crimes. This created an ethos of uncertainty, as citizens tried to determine the boundaries between legal and illegal, permissible and impermissible, public and private. The underground circulation of unpermitted videocassettes—an illegal process in which nearly everyone participated—helped everyday Iranians navigate the boundaries between these murky categories, even if only temporarily. In other words, because videocassettes were widespread but also illegal, consumers were doggedly aware of the risks involved in accessing movies on video and of their own precarious position in relation to the state.

The social, cultural, and political transformations that began with the establishment of the new government were confounded when Iraqi president

Saddam Hussein launched an offensive attack on Iran. On September 22, 1980, an eight-year war between Iran and Iraq began. Hussein's decision to invade Iran was a power grab. Given recent political unrest from the revolution, Iran was vulnerable, and Hussein wanted control over the Shatt al-Arab, a river near the border between the two countries that provided access to the Persian Gulf. Beyond that, Hussein took seriously Khomeini's threat to spread the Islamic Revolution to neighboring countries. In the end, the Iran-Iraq War would be the longest traditionally fought war of the twentieth century, with countless casualties on either side. What began as a war of defense for Iran—as it tried to ward off Iraqi advancements into Iranian territory—became an offensive war when Khomeini rejected a ceasefire agreement in June 1982. The urgency of war had allowed the new government to fortify its power and quell dissenting voices. By positioning the war as a holy battle between Shi'as and Sunnis, Khomeini also advocated for the relevance of Shi'a Islam as a political project. He saw these as reasonable justifications to extend the war by another six years. When it ended in August 1988, none of the prewar borders had changed, but the Islamic Republic had solidified its legitimacy. The possibility of a counterrevolution was a distant sight in the rearview mirror.

Because the war began so soon after the establishment of the new government, the story of the Islamic Republic is also the story of the Iran-Iraq War. This was certainly the case when it came to policies and practices related to media. While scholars often categorize pre- and post-revolutionary Iranian media, it was the war and not the revolution that most profoundly affected the country's mediascape. At a time when the young government sought to encourage the film industry as a propaganda organ, it also recognized the importance of state-sponsored media to the war effort. It funneled its resources into fostering a formal media culture that conformed to the war's ideological project.⁸ It provided subsidies and training initiatives for films and TV segments that promoted the state's particular vision of the conflict as a sacred war and as a continuation of the revolution. Many of the most important Iranian filmmakers of the last forty years entered the profession this way. The state used the urgency of wartime to justify keeping film and broadcast media at its beck and call. State-approved media content was therefore limited.

For those reasons, the war provided the perfect breeding ground for the kind of informality that fueled the underground video distribution network.

Formal media industries were so wrapped up in propagating the state's official message that they left very little room for entertainment. Films produced in this period consisted largely of poor-quality, didactic tales, while most TV programming was relegated to covering the war effort. Mediated entertainment could have provided a needed escape from the relentless messaging about the war, but such entertainment was often not available through formal channels.

Even if the kinds of films that would have entertained audiences had been available in Iran's cinema houses, the physical conditions of war made going to the movies dangerous and unpredictable. The Iran-Iraq War was not just fought on the frontlines; both sides also regularly bombed major cities, causing sudden electricity cuts and destruction to buildings like movie theaters. Given the instability outside, people sought refuge in their homes for days and weeks at a time. Home became the center of social life—it existed outside the war and often outside the state's encroaching laws and policies—and people needed something to do there. Home video technology was the perfect fit.⁹

The informal world of video only developed in response to formal attempts to regulate it. The ban did not determine the underground so much as haunt it—always present, always lurking in the shadows. The ban is part of what makes this story so interesting. Iran was one of only a handful of countries to attempt such severe restrictions on home video technology.¹⁰ The results of this experiment—the most extreme form of media regulation—were likely unexpected for the state, which never imagined that videocassettes would flourish under such harsh regulatory conditions.

The ban coincided with the consolidation of power in the Islamic Republic and especially the establishment of institutions like the MCIG. It crystallized the regime's views on home video technology at the time. Like many policies from this period, the state articulated the ban through the rhetoric of morality. When the head of the MCIG, Mohammad Khatami, announced the ban in May 1983, he decried video as obscene and likened it to a disease that could infect all of Iranian society. In addition to its professed desire to protect Iranians' moral sensibilities, there is also good evidence to suggest that the state was also interested in economically safeguarding state-run media, like cinema and television. Home video threatened this sanctioned media ecology by siphoning away viewers.

The ban was never codified into a single law. Throughout its decade-long life, it remained a series of policies issued by the MCIG. As a result, the

ban's precise meaning never became entirely clear for citizens, nor was it stable. The ban's enforcement, too, was inconsistent. People could be arrested, fined, or issued lashings for possessing or distributing videocassettes, but often they were released with little more than a slap on the wrist. The risks that people took were real, however. Many people who participated in the underground circulation of videocassettes received harsh punishments for violating the ban.

When the ban was lifted in 1994, many individual users never even noticed the shift. Until analog video technology fell out of favor in the early 2000s when digital formats replaced it, the state continued to try to limit the conditions under which people accessed the video market. After 1994, the MCIG authorized only one distribution company to deal in movies on video, and it issued permits to a meager number of titles. The underground distribution network, therefore, remained the primary means through which Iranians accessed cinema. The underground systems and processes that the ban had created continued to matter in Iran for decades to come.

Against the uncertainty of the revolution, the new government, and the war, videocassettes became a solid fixture of people's everyday lives. By the time the MCIG issued its video ban in 1983, video was already well on its way to becoming central to Iranian homes. The circulation and consumption of videocassettes provided a reliable constancy at a time when people's lives were otherwise ripped apart by political violence. Over the next two decades, Iranians would defy state mandates to consume millions of movies on video. Videocassettes as material objects did what media do best: they *mediated* the central concerns of their time and place. As I will show in detail in this book, the underground distribution and consumption of videocassettes *as material objects* provided a means of negotiating the power of the state and the agency of its citizens.

A METHOD FOR THE UNDERGROUND

To study the history of the videocassette in its social and cultural context requires that we excavate the underground. The word "underground" invokes a kaleidoscope of descriptors and images. In our cultural imaginary, the underground is—at its worst—dark, isolated, claustrophobic, and criminal. It is what Fyodor Dostoevsky famously called a "mousehole" in

Notes from the Underground: a place for outcasts and derelicts.¹¹ At its best, the underground fosters a world of thriving subcultures. Still the underbelly, this is where voguing, graffiti, and all-night parties become possible—a site that forges alternative visions of life, where prevalent notions of gender, sexuality, and class don't necessarily apply. As I argue throughout this book, the circulation of videocassettes discursively produced the underground in Iran in the 1980s and 1990s. In line with how we typically understand the underground, it was a space where alternative visions of national life were possible, where people negotiated what was formal and informal, legal and illegal, public and private. At the same time, unlike our prevailing conceptions of the underground, Iran's underground was not just the purview of a marginal few. It was neither dark nor did it *feel* criminal. On the contrary, the underground world of videocassettes was part of quotidian life for many Iranians of all different social classes. Perhaps counterintuitively, the underground in Iran mainstreamed informal media consumption as a facet of everyday life.

My argument in this book builds off of Rosalind Williams's assessment that the underground is a place where technologies abound. Equipped with examples like subway systems, mining sites, and telephone cables, she shows how literary works have represented the underground in order to navigate between technological pasts and futures.¹² In Iran, too, the underground in the 1980s and 1990s had a distinctly technological quality to it. It was a world produced through home video technology. Unlike Williams, I am not explicitly interested in imaginative works or the technological underground as a literary or filmic trope. Instead, the aim of this book is to explore the underground as a practical, lived experience for many Iranians in the 1980s and 1990s and to untangle the ways in which videocassette technology molded that experience.

The video underground was both discursive and material. It was shaped by state policies and people's attitudes toward them, but it was also composed of plastic shells and magnetic ribbon. Just as Karen Barad explains discursive practices as "material (re)configurations of the world,"¹³ the plastic bulk of videocassettes shaped the experience of the underground and determined what it could be.¹⁴ The materiality of video in this period shaped how users consumed, distributed, and archived movies and governed how they inhabited the underground. In this underworld, media were not just modes of transmission; they were the *objects* of transmission,

too. This duality is what made videocassettes so dangerous and at the same time so precious. People became attached not just to the content that circulated but also to the material objects themselves. Videocassettes had to be secretly transported in suitcases, under trench coats, and inside laundry bundles. The video dealers who did this work always ran the risk of being caught. Users understood the value of the video precisely because of the perils that were born of its bulk.

Videocassettes bore the traces of the love affair that Iranians had with the movies at the time. Repeated views, constant copying, and overhandling wore down the material of the videocassette, especially its delicate magnetic ribbon. Lucas Hilderbrand has argued that videocassettes have captured a history of use and access in their technical failures.¹⁵ Indeed, the underground itself was etched into the glitches, blips, and blurs often embedded in the movies on video. The videocassette embodied the underground and continues to do so today. Even decades after the ban, videocassettes still matter. Hidden under beds, shoved behind video store counters, stacked in the back of vintage shops, and piled up in storage units, they have returned to the underground. No longer watched or watchable, they endure perpetually in their boxy plastic form—reminders of a time when it wasn't so easy to access the movies. Ultimately, the physical matter of videocassettes has allowed them to matter culturally, too.

The underground in Iran is not just one place but many. In Persian, the word *zirzamini* (underground) has come to signify a range of activities and beliefs that occur outside of the state's legal and ideological framework—from the circulation of media to drugs and alcohol to oppositional political movements. At times, the various parts of the underground intersected on the material routes that supplied both alcohol and videocassettes, for example, or in the circulation of offset copies of banned books that sustained anti-regime political movements. But these connections between different components are not what made the underground legible to everyday Iranians. Despite the diversity of activities that occurred there, the underground existed coherently as a palpable crosscurrent to the regime's logic of power and control, which had otherwise saturated public life in the country. In this sense, the underground was political; it always existed in opposition to the state.

In this book, I advance two claims with respect to the underground in Iran. First, the video distribution network as a case study affords us an entry

point to uncovering the inner workings of the broader underground that developed in Iran after the revolution. The narrow focus on video provides an opportunity for rich engagement with the dynamics of the Iranian underground writ large. Second, and perhaps more ambitiously, I argue that videocassettes actually helped to institutionalize the underground within the Islamic Republic. The video network may have been informal, but its operations nevertheless depended on rigorous systems, routes, and procedures. These processes structured the underground not as an alternative to national belonging but rather as a central fact of everyday life for many Iranians. The underground existed well before the advent of videocassettes,¹⁶ but home video technology helped produce the underground as a coherent space for the many Iranians who participated in the circulation of movies on video in the 1980s and 1990s.

But how to study such a place? Even though the underground world of video and its centrality to everyday life are common knowledge to the people who lived through the ban, there is little formal documentation to show what that world actually looked like. Scholars have barely scratched the surface when it comes to the history of the videocassette in Iran.¹⁷ There may be several reasons for this lacuna, but the most important is the methodological challenge that the underground presents. As I hope to have made clear by this point, the distribution of movies on video, although widespread, was an informal practice that operated on the periphery of what was considered legal. We know that around the globe, most people access cinema through informal means of distribution, including analog and digital video. It is only recently, however, that scholars such as Ramon Lobato have begun to develop the methods and vocabulary for studying consumer technologies and the informal distribution practices they enable.

Media historians, in particular, have struggled to account for these kinds of informal practices in their work. The underground world of video that I present in this book did not leave behind many of the traditional sources on which historians typically depend. This was an informal industry; there were no budgets, internal memos, contracts, or official correspondence. The kinds of popular sources that historians have used as a window into the everyday lived experiences of media technologies—such as magazines, newspaper editorials, television shows, and movies—also bear serious limitations when it comes to the history of video in Iran. Given the stringent regulation of media, including the press, sources that do reference video

reinforce the state's stance at the time. Official sources represent video as a contraband technology and as a vessel for Western imperialism. While they acknowledge that an illicit market for video rental existed, they do little to instruct us on the mechanics, economic structures, labor schemes, and affective regimes that encouraged this underground system.

The case of home video technology in Iran thus poses an important methodological question. How do we study the history of informal media industries when their very informality resists documentation? How do we begin to map the robust underground network of video rental in Iran in the 1980s and 1990s and to study how people engaged with it? I propose oral history as a methodology to grapple with untraceable, undocumented historical media phenomena.

Much like media themselves, oral history is an inherently unstable category. It means many things to many different people. For me, oral history involves gathering historical data through sustained, open-form interviews with people who lived through, participated in, or witnessed certain events or periods. The key here is what I mean by *historical data*. Given that memories often fail us, oral history interviews do not yield facts and figures—or even some form of definitive truth. Instead, they provide narratives and stories. Those stories reveal much about the people who tell them, about their shifting values and priorities, and about what it means to remember, interpret, and reinterpret past experiences. Scholarship that draws on oral history interviews must prioritize those subjectivities rather than some illusive objectivity.

This book is thus, in part, an oral history of the videocassette in Iran. Between 2015 and 2018, I conducted forty-two in-depth interviews with a variety of people who participated in the circulation of videocassettes between the late 1970s and early 2000s. I conducted these interviews primarily in Iran, although several were with Iranian expatriates who live in the United States. While a handful of interviews were conducted in English, most of them took place in Persian. Thus, one of my roles in the writing of this book was that of translator. Sometimes that meant translating language from Persian to English, but more often it meant translating the experiences and cultural baggage that come with any language.

My interlocutors included consumers of home video technology, video distributors, film critics, government employees, video store owners, and filmmakers. The majority of people I interviewed were in Tehran when they engaged with video technology. However, I also interviewed people

who were far from the country's political center during this period, including the cities of Mashhad, Bushehr, and Rasht. This may seem like a limited sample, and by some measures it is. And yet oral history is never about the quantity of interviews conducted. Each and every oral history interview opens up a world of possibilities when it comes to rethinking history and theorizing media more generally. As such, I do not mean to suggest that this book is *the* history of video technology in Iran. Rather, this book presents *a* history of video. A different corpus of interviews may have yielded an entirely different project altogether.

Researching the underground world of videocassettes is potentially risky business. Although decades in the past, this episode in Iranian history remains politically charged. The people whose stories inspired this book shared their memories of crime, war, intimacy, adolescence, and quotidian life. My oral history interviews thus became an exercise in trust as much as anything else. For this reason, my first interviews were with people I already knew—friends, acquaintances, and colleagues who had previously mentioned their relationship to videocassettes. It was through their enthusiasm for the project and their social and professional networks that I gained access to a much wider swath of video consumers and distributors, especially those residing in Iran. My command of Persian, which I began studying as an undergraduate, helped me build trust during these interviews. It also occasionally worked as a hindrance, as an American in Tehran who spoke Persian fluently could raise suspicion—and rightfully so, given the long history of American imperialism and interference in the region.

At the outset of every interview, I offered my interlocutors the promise of anonymity. Many insisted at the beginning that they didn't mind if I revealed their identities. By the end, however, most had changed their minds entirely, asking that I not identify them in my writing. This about-face suggests a lot about the oral history interview and also the underground. In excavating their memories, my interlocutors recalled the dangers of accessing movies on video; they remembered how political the video infrastructure had actually been. But more than that, during the course of our discussions, people revealed more about themselves than they had expected—about their fears, their transgressions, and their desires. Indeed, oral history as a method is important to this study because it surfaces the underground infrastructure as a site where the political and the personal penetrated the materials, processes, and technologies that fueled it.

Throughout this book, I understand the *underground* not just as a set of practices related to the informal circulation of media but also as a methodology unto itself. In an underground methodology, oral history interviews contextualize information from archival sources and vice versa. As I have noted, oral history is a central component of my research. Yet it is hardly the only source material I consider. Because the underground of Iran in the 1980s and 1990s was a site of myriad contradictions, a careful mapping requires that I draw on a multitude of sources and perspectives. In particular, archival material, including popular and legal sources, preserved the state's official stance on home video technology, even as it transformed over time. These sources—including laws, policies, newspapers, trade publications, films, and essays—were formally published, a stark contrast to my oral history interviews as discursive sources. Activating the underground as method has meant holding these two kinds of sources—oral history and archival—in constant tension, allowing neither to overpower the other. While oral history interviews attuned me to the everyday sensations of the underground, archival material often drew my attention to the state's power, which was omnipresent, even if not absolute. By bringing this divergent source material together, the underground becomes a site in which a number of in-betweens become visible, for perhaps the first time.

As one of my interlocutors, Farid, would tell me, “During the 1980s, we were like a huge colony of ants.” He laughed, “We all lived underground. Burrowing and tunneling, we created an entire world that had nothing to do with up above.” In some respects, the underground was literal. The war forced families into their basements, where they would wait out bombings under the surface of the city, sometimes for days on end. But the underground world Farid described meant something more than just a subterranean space that provided shelter from war. It was also a systematic and orderly way of living outside of state laws and regulations. In the chapters that follow, we will peek inside those tunnels and consider all the ways in which they were reinforced with and constituted by the hard plastic shell and magnetic ribbon of a videocassette. Such a view is not always easy. As Farid asked me, “Have you ever seen an anthill blow away with a single gust of wind? We knew that our underground world could collapse in an instant.” My approach in this book attempts to document and make sense of something that was both enduringly solid and exquisitely tenuous.

WHY VIDEO, WHY IRAN, WHY NOW?

Beyond the tenuousness of the underground itself, this book also asks that media scholars take seriously—or at least notice—the very details of media access that we as users have learned to overlook. The secret life of video-cassettes in Iran reveals an entirely different vision of Iranian cinema than what scholars have imagined so far. In such a vision, cinema isn't something so much produced as it is accessed. During the course of my interviews, my interlocutors often recounted how they would watch a movie on video from start to finish, even if the images and sounds were distorted beyond comprehension. Iranians were acutely aware of the work and risks that went into accessing every movie on video. This sentiment, which I heard time and time again, tells us that sometimes *how* people access movies is more important than *what* they actually see on screen. And yet questions of distribution and access are often sidelined in film and media studies—a field that to date has favored accounts of media production and reception.¹⁸ A recent turn to new materialism has inspired works by scholars such as Caetlin Benson-Allott, Anna McCarthy, and Lisa Parks, who have begun treating modes of access not simply as a matter of fact but rather as integral to the experiences of consuming and understanding media.¹⁹

What it means to access media is particularly fraught when it comes to the Islamic Republic of Iran, where reports of censorship, filtering, and jamming abound. Certainly, it is tempting to view Iran as a place where stringent, oppressive laws dictate every aspect of people's lives—and to some extent that may be true. But the very presence of an underground world of video signaled the *failure* of state policy to regulate media more than its successes. Peter Decherney has shown that regulatory policies offer a rich entry into studying the “power, politics, and art” of media.²⁰ Such an approach does not necessarily presuppose that government and corporate regulations are absolute. Indeed, in Iran in the 1980s and 1990s, it was the absence of effective laws and policies that allowed ordinary people to develop norms and practices that facilitated the circulation of and access to movies.²¹ Embedded in those norms and practices—and even in the video-cassettes themselves—was the triumph of everyday people over the state, and even the triumph of cinema itself.

It is important that we inspect such extralegal practices. Scholarship and popular media often represent Iran and other countries in the Middle East

simply in terms of their autocratic regimes. Such a framing of the region suggests that ordinary people have very little opportunity to live their lives outside of repressive laws or to reject the legal dictates of the day. In contrast, the underground distribution of videocassettes in Iran exposes the perforation of political power. Attention to this underground network highlights how the young Iranian government struggled to maintain control when confronted with the passions and ambitions of its citizens. In this regard, *Underground* joins a growing body of work that seeks to decenter state power in Iran and restore agency to the various actors who push back against, negotiate with, or refuse to acknowledge the state's regulations.²²

The underground video network in Iran also provides an opportunity to rethink informal media beyond dominant capitalistic frameworks. An impressive body of scholarship has begun taking unregulated media practices seriously.²³ Shifting the conversation away from the ethics of such practices, these studies situate piracy as a practical means of media access for people around the world. Central to many of these accounts is piracy's relationship to copyright law, which is inextricable from capitalist logic.²⁴ After all, intellectual property regimes are themselves part of today's neoliberal order, treating creativity as capital and protecting large multinational corporations more than individual artists.²⁵ Barbara Klinger's important study of the informal circulation of *Titanic* (1999) in Afghanistan demonstrates the entanglements between piracy and capitalism. Critical reception in the United States viewed the piracy of *Titanic* in Afghanistan as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, critics decried the piracy of a globally successful film like *Titanic*, which amounted to a loss of billions of dollars for the American film industry. On the other hand, they celebrated Hollywood's ability to represent Western, liberal democratic ideals for audiences in Afghanistan.²⁶ Thus, Klinger's study shows how the concept of piracy is burdened with the capitalistic ambitions of copyright law.

As we will see, piracy and copyright are inadequate frames for analyzing the underground circulation of videocassettes in Iran. As Ramon Lobato suggests, "the term piracy entrenches a master paradigm—intellectual property—that should instead be dismantled."²⁷ Part of undoing such a paradigm involves acknowledging that intellectual property regimes do not extend to every place with equal force. Although the Iranian video network may have looked like piracy, it was structured by a different set of priorities, logics, and industrial and regulatory frames. Indeed, intellectual property would not

become a serious talking point in Iran until the early 2000s, after the decline of home video technology.²⁸ Today Iran still is not a signatory to any international copyright agreement. While Iranians in the 1980s and 1990s recognized underground video culture as illegal, its illegality had little to do with copyright violations or commodity culture. Instead, the various informal practices that determined underground video culture resisted the state's logic of control and surveillance.

For this reason, I have avoided the word "piracy" throughout the book where possible. To impose the rhetoric of piracy onto the video circuits that animated the Iranian underground would be to evoke questions of intellectual property that are only peripheral to the story of videocassettes in the country. Perhaps worse, to evaluate the informal media practices in Iran through the rubric of copyright would be to foreclose many of the unique qualities of the underground infrastructure. As I will show, the underground video infrastructure at times shared striking similarities with informal economies elsewhere, even in those places where copyright mattered a great deal. And yet informal media practices are always unique to a particular place and time, as is the rhetoric that people used to discuss them. The Iranians I spoke with never used the word "piracy" to describe the underground world of videocassettes and only rarely used the word *qāchāq* (smuggling), the government's preferred word to describe the movement of both illegal media and drugs. In my interviews I more often heard the word *zirzamini* (underground) to describe the distribution and consumption of videocassettes. For Iranians, this word powerfully captured the multitude of informal practices and legal forces that shaped video culture at the time.

By remaining sensitive to how people describe the underground network, I treat video as a discursive object that indexes larger cultural phenomena in Iran. I see this approach as an extension of Michael Z. Newman's work on video in the United States. Newman traces semantic shifts in the word "video" since its first appearance in the 1930s to show that any given medium is not just an assemblage of technologies, practices, and aesthetic forms, but also "a shifting constellation of ideas in popular imagination, including ideas about value, authenticity, and legitimacy."²⁹ In Iran, too, the beliefs and values associated with video shaped it as an underground medium. While I do not adopt the same long view as Newman, one of the goals of *Underground* is to investigate the ways in which various stakeholders—including governmental actors, informal laborers, and everyday consumers—understood, negotiated, and

contested the meaning of video throughout the 1980s and 1990s. As Brian Larkin reminds us, “the meanings attached to technologies, their technical functions, and the social uses to which they are put are not an inevitable consequence but something worked out over time in the context of considerable cultural debate.”³⁰ In this book, I do not take for granted the inevitability of underground video culture in Iran. Rather, I examine how the informal video infrastructure became socially realized. I take stock of the material that constituted it; the ideas that fashioned it; and the political conditions under which it operated.

This book shows that, even in an age of social media and digital platforms, the legacy of home video technology continues to matter in Iran. Although the heyday of this analog medium seems decades behind us, we can learn a lot from studying its history and lasting relevance. After all, video precipitated the young Islamic Republic’s first great media crisis. How the state attempted to control this unruly medium and how everyday people responded to those attempts set important precedents when it comes to contemporary media regulation, distribution, and consumption. For this reason, each chapter in this book ends not in the past but in the present. More episodic than linear, this narrative strategy is about corollaries rather than causality. In other words, I do not mean to trace an uncritical path from the past to the present but rather show that the parameters drawn by home video technology during the 1980s and 1990s still condition what media in Iran are allowed to be and what they are allowed to do, even today.

For many former video users, nostalgia is the lens through which we might understand this uneasy relationship between past and present. Like elsewhere in the world, popular media in Iran have recently contended with the legacy of videocassettes. Over the last several years, a number of essays, movies, television shows, novels, magazine issues, and social media accounts have revisited this complicated period in Iranian history. Often these representations of underground video culture betray a longing for a time when technologies and life seemed simpler and more pleasurable. This nostalgic return is not a coincidence, nor should we brush it aside as meaningless. Nostalgia is not static affect but rather a dynamic structure through which people understand the present through the past.

Thus, I claim nostalgia as both mood and method for this book.³¹ By mood, I mean nostalgia articulated as a disposition, a way of looking at the world. It orients us to a certain set of questions and assumptions. Rather

than deny the nostalgic hues of my sources, especially the oral history interviews, I found value in replicating and redescribing them. The publication of this book constitutes another episode in the ongoing project of nostalgia for video in Iran and beyond. But I see no problem or contradiction in that fact. As a method, nostalgia tells us just as much about the present as it does about the past.³² Nostalgia is a generative mode rather than a valley or a lull. Indeed, it is a call to reflect on the past in order to understand the present and intervene in the future. In the pages that follow, I dive deep into the underground world of videocassettes in Iran and endeavor to tell the extraordinary tale of a time when movies were hard plastic bricks: a careful intermingling of magnetic ribbon, stainless steel screws, polypropylene shells, knobs, and reels. This was the world of home video—of videocassettes and players, of video dealers and consumers—where the underground was a way of life.

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