Journalism in Iran charts the development of the profession in Iran since the 1979 Revolution that replaced the monarchy with an Islamic Republic.

The book is aimed at finding out the extent to which journalism in Iran has approached the idea and practices of media professionalism that are common in the West. The author provides a social, political, and economic context for the work of Iranian journalists who have received attention by the international media mostly as victims of repeated attacks on the press or detentions of media workers.

The study focuses on newspapers, the only segment of the Iranian media where independent journalism has had an opportunity to develop. Radio and television which have almost always been controlled by the state, and the much younger but fast growing online journalism, are discussed separately to provide a fuller picture of Iran’s media environment. Separate chapters are dedicated to Iranian women’s contribution to journalism; organization, education, and training of journalists; and the legal framework in which Iranian journalists have had to work since the country’s first Press Law was introduced, following the 1906 Constitutional Revolution. Relying on critique of the Iranian media by journalists and academics writing in Iran, Hossein Shahidi argues that urgent and thorough reform of editorial policies and practices in Iran’s major media organizations is vital to provide the public with the regular flow of high quality information that is needed for a healthy society.

Written to pay homage to Iranian journalists, without ignoring their shortcomings, this richly systemic evaluation of journalism in Iran will appeal to scholars and students of Iranian Studies, as well as anyone interested in Media Studies and Middle Eastern Studies.

Hossein Shahidi teaches Communication at the American University of Beirut. He was a journalist and journalist trainer for more than twenty years, mostly at the BBC World Service, and Gender and Media Specialist with the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in Afghanistan (2003–04).
Since 1967 the International Society for Iranian Studies (ISIS) has been a leading learned society for the advancement of new approaches in the study of Iranian society, history, culture, and literature. The new ISIS Iranian Studies series published by Routledge will provide a venue for the publication of original and innovative scholarly works in all areas of Iranian and Persianate Studies.

Journalism in Iran
From mission to profession
Hossein Shahidi
To Roya, Farhad, and Farhang
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## Guide to transliteration

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<tr>
<td>آ</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>آمد</td>
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<td>ا</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>اکبر</td>
<td>Akbar</td>
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<td>ا</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>انظامی</td>
<td>Entezami</td>
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<tr>
<td>ج</td>
<td>j</td>
<td>جواد</td>
<td>Javan</td>
<td>This is by far the most frequent use of the letter ‘J’.</td>
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<td>د</td>
<td>j</td>
<td>زیلا</td>
<td>Jilla</td>
<td>Due to the less frequent appearance of this Persian character, the letter ‘J’ has also been used in such cases.</td>
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<td>j</td>
<td>زیاد</td>
<td>Nejad</td>
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<td>سالم</td>
<td>Salam</td>
<td>Islam, Eslam, Mohsen, Rastakhiz, Resalat</td>
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<td>فرقان</td>
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<td>قابل = Gahel</td>
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<td>Double character</td>
<td>ق</td>
<td>حجت الاسلام</td>
<td>Hojjatoleslam</td>
<td>قادر = Ghaed</td>
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<td>رضا</td>
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<td>تاسخیر</td>
<td>Tasskhir</td>
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There were two full-scale revolutions in Iran in the twentieth century. The first one, begun at the turn of the twentieth century, was a revolt of the society against the state for the establishment of government based in law as opposed to arbitrary rule which had been the ancient form of government in the country. All the revolutionaries were united in this central objective while democracy and socio-economic modernization were the further aims of the more radical and modern elements in the revolution. Twentieth-century Iran did experience socio-economic development but its system of government still revolved around the age-old cycle of arbitrary rule-chaos-arbitrary rule.

The second revolution was also a revolt of the society against the state which no social class or organized political party would be prepared to defend. The principal objectives of this revolution were the overthrow of the arbitrary state and the rejection of its Westernist culture and politics, alike by religious traditionalists, Marxist–Leninists and – to a lesser extent – social and liberal democrats. But the anti-Westernist stance of the revolution – clear though it was – was itself a product of the fact that the arbitrary state had identified itself with the West, otherwise it would not have become a common goal of the entire society.

The media played an important role in both revolutions. A modern public sphere had begun to emerge alongside the constitutionalist movement of the earlier revolution. Whether or not a public sphere of sorts had existed in Iranian history, there can be little doubt that modern public sphere of the kind that had emerged in Europe from the late seventeenth century had had no precedent in Iran before the twentieth century. Modern newspapers, virtually all of which were pro-revolutionary, spread rapidly through the constitutionalist movement. But just as the government in law was soon replaced by social and political chaos, much of the press ignored all limits and bounds to freedom of expression, liberty giving way to licence whereby reckless journalism left little for the reputations of those who were targeted, be they the Shah, ministers, politicians, ulama, merchants, or other journalists.

The chaos that had been the unanticipated and illegitimate offspring of constitutionalism came to an end together with constitutionalism itself with the rise of
the Pahlavi state in the mid-1920s. Within a few years little was left of freedom of the press and expression. In the previous period chaos had tuned liberty into licence and now liberty was lost with the application of order and arbitrary rule. In 1941 the intrusion of World War II into Iran once again let loose the chaotic forces embedded in Iranian society.

This was immediately manifested in the press, much of which was disorderly and licentious, although a part of it behaved with greater responsibility. This period came to an end with the coup d’etat of 1953 which ended the chaos and licence but left some room for freedom of the press and public expression. It was from the failure of the revolt of June 1963 that absolute censorship began to be applied, such that until 1977 critical public opinion virtually ceased to exist, the press being unable to disseminate news and opinion which was not officially approved.

Hossein Shahidi’s rich and fascinating account covers the development of Iranian journalism since the revolution. He describes the missionary zeal of frustrated journalists turned freedom lovers overnight, who both reflected and enhanced the public belief that the millennium would be at hand simply by the abolition of the monarchy. There were differences of views among journalists as there were among the public, but there was virtually no doubt among them along with the entire society that the fall of the monarchy and with it the rejection of the hated Westernism would promise the dawn of a golden era. They were soon disappointed after the triumph of February 1979. ‘The Spring of Freedom’ did not last much longer than the season itself and by the end of the summer many newspapers were shut down.

The onset in 1980 of the long war between Iran and Iraq left little freedom to speak of any kind, including that of the press, except to some extent within the few technical and scientific journals. It was a reflection of the war without and the intense civil conflict within the society itself. Like the period before 1977, what was left of the public sphere was not much more than the limited space tolerated by the state. By then many if not most of the old hands in Iranian journalism had emigrated, moved to other activities or gone to prison.

The early 1990s saw an opening up with the emergence of newspapers and journals which, often in difficult circumstances, began to disseminate news and express opinions other than those strictly desired by the state. This was a small but promising opening which further spread as a result of the reform movement which began in the late 1990s. By the year 2000 however the conservative forces, with the judiciary as their main vehicle, began to apply sanctions against liberal journalism, although the move was not entirely retrospective and some of the achievements of the 1990s survived. Still Iran is a long way from a free as well as responsible press.

Shahidi’s account and analysis is virtually compulsory reading not only for those interested in the development of Iranian journalism in the last 30 years, but for anyone with a serious interest in the history and politics of contemporary Iran. He has used many primary sources, both newspapers and interviews.
His narrative of revolutionary events is balanced, fair, and competent. His description of the evolution of Iranian journalism into a public profession is unique and original. And above all his analysis of almost three decades of social and political developments is acute and insightful. This is a book the study of which will benefit teacher, student, and lay reader alike for years to come.

Homa Katouzian
St Antony’s College and the Oriental Institute
University of Oxford
August 2006
This book is the result of the author’s experience in and study of Iranian journalism over some twenty-five years. The last decade of this period was spent seeking an answer to the question whether Iran, with a history of propagandistic official media and a highly politicized, mostly underground, anti-establishment press could see the development of professional journalism, with practitioners who would make their living out of reporting without promoting party political aims, and a state and a public who would acknowledge that such a feat was possible and, indeed, required for the smooth functioning of the country’s affairs. The author’s own understanding of journalism in Britain, much of it gained while working at the BBC World Service (1983–2001), helped shape the viewpoint through which the Iranian experience was observed.

The initial incentive for the research was provided in the mid-1980s by four specialist Iranian periodicals: San’at-e Haml-o Naghl (Transport Industry), Film, Keshavarz (The Farmer), and the literary magazine Adineh (Friday). All four were staffed by journalists not affiliated to the state, working under Iran’s ‘traditional’ conditions of censorship that had been exacerbated by the bloody confrontation between the Islamic Republic and its domestic opponents on the one hand and the war with Iraq on the other. Surprisingly, all four, and several other similar publications, seemed capable of tackling a wide range of issues, some technical and some general, in a calm and factual language, much closer to that of the best of their contemporary newspapers in the West, rather than the angry and flowery one used by the campaigning Iranian opposition press abroad, or the ‘symbolic’ style of the pre-Revolution dissident press inside the country.

Visits to Iran and meetings with journalists on the four publications confirmed that accurate, fair, balanced, and comprehensive journalism was indeed the goal shared by them all, in spite of their widely differing political views. One of the most intriguing comments came from my friend and colleague, Mohammad Ghaed, who had worked on Iran’s youngest daily newspaper before the Revolution, Ayandegan (Posterity), had remained with the paper until its closure soon after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, and later joined San’at-e Haml-o Naghl. While we were drinking tea on a pleasant Tehran autumn afternoon in the early 1990s, he said rather casually: ‘Nowadays in Iran, one can make a living out of writing.’ The search for the causes of this phenomenon gave a new dimension to the author’s investigation of journalism in Iran, which was completed at St Antony’s College, Oxford, in 2005.
Acknowledgements

The author has been inspired by the collective effort of hundreds of Iranian journalists over the past quarter century, has learned from many of them, and is grateful to them. Special thanks are due to Mr Mohammad Ghaed, who provided the author not only with a stronger motivation for this research, but also with invaluable information, insight and comments on the typescript. The author is also indebted to Mr Ali Zarghani, the founder of the monthly, San’at-e Haml-o Naghl, and Mr Mass’oud Mehrabi, the founder of the monthly, Film, for their friendship and professional support, and to Dr Hassan Namakdoost-Tehrani, who carefully read and commented on the final typescript. Mr Hossein Taghavi, of Matbou’ati-ye Pars (Pars Press Services) in Tehran, greatly facilitated the research by providing books on the Iranian press and collections of publications, some of them rare.

Dr Ali Mohammadi of Nottingham-Trent University helped the author with the first academic steps in his research, and Mr Bob Nelson at the BBC enabled the author to continue the research at St Antony’s College. The author is grateful to Mr Mark Brayne, then at the BBC World Service, Professor Roger Griffin of Oxford Brookes University, and Dr Mohammad Nafissi of London Metropolitan University for having supported his application for research at St Antony’s; to Dr John Gurney of Oxford University for his administrative help; to Dr Saiedeh Lotfian of Tehran University, Professor Mark Gasiorowski of Louisiana State University, and Professor Reza Sheikholeslami of Oxford University for their encouraging and enlightening comments during the author’s preliminary examinations; and to the final examiners, Professor Sheikholeslami, and Professor Vanessa Martin of the Royal Holloway College, University of London. Homa Katouzian, as a friend and academic supervisor, has been a unique source of strength during the author’s career at the BBC, throughout his research, and beyond.

Any errors or shortcomings are the author’s responsibility alone. The author hopes that this first systematic examination of post-Revolution journalism in Iran will provide the starting point for much more thorough investigations of one of the most fascinating aspects of life in Iran in recent times.

Hossein Shahidi
London, August 2006
Before the 1979 Revolution, most professional Iranian journalists, that is those who relied on journalism as their main or only source of income, worked in newspapers which were not independent of the state. On the other hand, many of those who wrote for the independent press relied either on personal wealth or on income from other activities, very often working for the government. The full-time journalists usually referred to their occupation as *khedmat* or service – rather similar to being enlisted in the armed forces.\(^1\) Writing for the independent press was often considered not a career, but a *mission* to enlighten the public.

The battles for power that immediately followed the Revolution and were intensified by the Iran-Iraq war left little room for the emergence of independent, professional journalism, except for a small number of specialist monthlies. The gradual relaxation of political tensions and the country’s economic recovery after the war led to a rise in the number of independent specialist journals and the appearance of a range of political newspapers representing various factions within the Islamic Republic. The independent press was increasingly staffed by journalists who did not have any other significant sources of income. At the same time, journalists working on the state-owned or state-controlled newspapers often complained of government officials who would refuse to provide them with information or would take action against journalists whose reports they disliked. Some journalists working in the state-owned media were also critical of the compulsory coverage of official functions irrespective of their news value.

The two groups of journalists found common cause in seeking recognition as professionals, similar to physicians and lawyers, entitled to regulate their affairs independently, an effort that has been the subject of the present research. Although ‘journalism’ usually refers both to the print and the electronic media, the study will focus on newspapers, the only segment of the Iranian media where independent journalism has had an opportunity to develop. Radio and television which have almost always been controlled by the state are discussed separately, as is the much younger but fast growing online journalism, in order to define Iran’s media environment more clearly. The study is based on literature mostly in Persian, published in Iran, and interviews conducted in Iran and abroad.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the build-up and eruption of the revolutionary movement during 1977–79, when Iran’s tightly controlled press gradually came
into confrontation with the state, journalists in major newspapers went on strike, and some of them were imprisoned. The circulation of newspapers rose rapidly following the overthrow of the monarchy. However, even before the Shah had left the country, journalists found themselves in conflict with the religious leaders of the Revolution who were to set up the Islamic Republic.

Chapters 2 and 3 cover the intensification of the clash between the new state and the secular press, especially the high-circulation dailies *Kayhan* and *Ayandegan*, and dozens of other newspapers, many of them left-wing, that had appeared during and shortly after the fall of the Shah’s regime. As a result, dozens of newspapers were closed down and many professional journalists left the country, gave up journalism or began working in specialist monthlies that gradually appeared under the Islamic Republic.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 cover the emergence of a range of newspapers reflecting the views of various tendencies within the Islamic Republic, followed by new conflicts between the state and the press, with more newspaper closures and imprisonment of more journalists, most of whom had been avid supporters of the new regime.

Chapter 7 examines women’s contribution to journalism in Iran, from the appearance in 1910 of the first women’s newspaper, *Danesh* (Knowledge), which lasted less than an year, to early twenty-first century when women made up nearly a quarter of the country’s estimated 5,000 professional journalists.

Chapter 8 outlines the origins and operations of Iran’s radio and television and the country’s emerging online publications, as well as the rapidly proliferating ‘weblogs’ or online personal diaries that enabled a large number of people, most of them young, to express themselves in public at a fraction of the cost of publishing a newspaper. Online news agencies and news sites were also used by rival political factions within the Islamic Republic following a series of newspaper closures that began in April 2000. This, in turn, led to the closure of some of the sites operated by the reformist groups and the detention of journalists who had been working on them.

Chapter 9 examines the emergence of journalists’ unions and centres for journalism training and education whose numbers increased along with the rise in the numbers of journalists in the country.

Chapter 10 discusses the legal framework in which Iranian journalists have had to work since the 1906 Constitutional Revolution, which introduced the first of Iran’s six Press Laws. Journalists have argued that each version of the law has placed new restrictions on press freedom.

Chapter 11 concludes that while the quality of journalism in Iran has suffered by the repeated closure of newspapers and detention of journalists, the number of newspapers and of journalists and their trade organizations today is so large that the profession is more resilient than it was at the time of the 1979 Revolution which drove out many of those who had already been active in the press. However, this encouraging quantitative growth needs to be supported with a qualitative development that requires a stable and secure environment.
The 1978–79 Revolution found the Iranian press in a state of deep hibernation, with about 100 newspapers, 23 of them dailies, compared to around 300, including 25 dailies, in 1952, a year before Mohammad Mosaddeq’s government was overthrown in the coup organized by the United States and Britain. The fall in the number of newspapers was all the more remarkable since over the same period Iran’s population had doubled to 35 million – 50 per cent of them living in cities, a rise of around 70 per cent – and the literacy rate had risen by five times, to just over 50 per cent.

The sharp decline in the number of newspapers had been caused principally by three rounds of mass closures by the government, almost exactly at 10-year intervals. The first round, immediately after the 1953 coup, affected dozens of left-wing and nationalist newspapers that had emerged during the movement for the nationalization of Iranian oil. In March 1963, when the number of newspapers had risen to 227, the government closed down 71 of them, using a cabinet resolution that banned the publication of Tehran-based newspapers with circulations below 3,000 copies and magazines with circulations below 5,000. In August 1974, the government used the same resolution to close down 63 newspapers, even though some of these had very high circulations. The satirical weekly Towfig, one of the highest-selling papers in Iran, was closed down in the same year without any official explanation. Towfig’s publishers said the main reason behind the closure had been the desire by the then Prime Minister, Amir-Abbas Hoveyda, to turn the magazine into ‘an obedient and sycophantic’ paper, so the Shah who read it would not receive any unfavourable reports about the way the country was run, and Hoveyda’s tenure would continue unperturbed.

Of the 100 or so newspapers that remained in circulation by 1978, 64 were being published in Tehran, most of them specialist periodicals on health, sports, religion, and science. There were also six national daily newspapers, including the country’s oldest – the afternoon dailies, Ettela’at (Information), founded in 1925, and Kayhan (Universe), founded in 1942. Nicknamed ‘The Twin Giants’, they were, and are, the flagship papers of firms with the same names. The other four dailies – all of which were to disappear soon – included two large circulation, young, morning dailies, Rastakhiz (Resurgence), launched in 1975 by the single party of the same name created by the Shah, and the 11-year old

1 The Shah’s last years (1977–79)
Ayandegan (Posterity); the much smaller Paygham-e Emrouz (Today’s Message), which adopted an increasingly crucial tone before the Revolution developed; and the business paper, Bourse (Stock Exchange). While circulation figures have been among the most tightly guarded secrets of the Iranian press, Kayhan is reported to have sold 300,000 copies a day in 1977. Ettela’at could be assumed to have had a similar circulation, with the other papers selling far fewer copies.

Ettela’at and Kayhan, firms of comparable sizes, with a wide range of publications in Persian, English, French, and Arabic, were among the country’s major employers. In 1976, Kayhan had a staff of 1,500 in Tehran and 1,200 in the provinces. By comparison, the average number of staff in Iran’s large industrial firms in the same year was 60. The biggest employers were the car manufacturing companies, with an average staff size of 1,100, soft drink factories with about 600 and the textile industry with 378. Most of the employees in both newspapers worked in the administrative, technical, and distribution areas, with the editorial staff accounting for about 100, or less than 10 per cent, in each firm. Financially, the two newspaper groups were highly profitable businesses with huge amounts of advertising, printing, and distribution revenues from the state and private sectors. Even during the 1978–79 Revolution, when Iran’s economy had slowed down because of widespread strikes which closed down the newspapers themselves for more than two months, Kayhan made a profit, albeit a modest one, of about 0.4 per cent.

Politically, both firms were parts of the Shah’s establishment, Ettela’at’s founder and owner, Abbas Mass’oudi, and Kayhan’s Mostafa Mesbahzadeh having become members of the Senate. After an early period of intense rivalry, by the mid-1970s the two papers were hardly seen as different from each other. The heads of both firms were among the shareholders of several banks and large firms, owned major properties, and had family links with the owners of other big businesses. Any new firm, organization or group would try to have one or both of the newspaper owners on its management board to ensure that its news would be carried by the papers. For the papers too, such membership was a means of gaining more influence.

Multiple occupations, including holding official and editorial positions simultaneously, were also common amongst the staff of the two papers, without any apparent concerns for conflict of interests. Journalists could be found on the payroll at high levels of important ministries, or at lowly posts at Tehran Municipality ‘on the same grade as street sweepers’. As a member of staff of the Ministry of Finance, a business correspondent could benefit from advance knowledge of changes in the tax or customs regulations. Links with the municipality could lead to information about the latest urban development plans, enabling the journalist to buy land in the areas concerned and make a profit by selling it once the plans had been announced. Senior staff would also receive gifts in cash or kind from public or private bodies, the total value of which could amount to several times a journalist’s monthly salary. The very close relationship between the newspapers and the government not only made it easy for the government’s views to be expressed by the papers, but it also made it unnecessary for the security
services to have resident officers at newspapers. Senior editors had to have clearance from, and maintained regular contacts with, the Shah’s intelligence organization, the SAVAK. Any open expression of dissent by the editorial rank and file would be suppressed, sometimes leading to a journalist being jailed or banned from writing. Managers or senior editors would receive daily telephone calls from the Ministry of Information on what they should or should not write and would issue some of these instructions as circulars.

‘Silent giants’

_Ettela’at_ and _Kayhan_, the only newspapers with their own networks of reporters, had come to rely heavily on the state-owned Pars News Agency and the competing news service run by the state-owned National Iranian Radio and Television, NIRT. In the not too distant past, the two papers had been the main sources for Iranian radio’s evening news bulletin. By 1974, limitations on the press had led _Ettela’at_ itself to complain that ‘the press is not able to investigate anything independently, to find out about the deep roots of the issues.’ In the words of the historian of the modern Iranian press, Mass’oud Barzin, during the preceding decade,

> neither of the two papers had raised any major social issue which would matter to the millions of human beings. They only tackled marginal subjects or those of interest to small groups. They would pit painters against each other; act as emissaries in the battle between classical and modern poets; carry reports on crime and murder; and limit themselves to printing short foreign news items and mutilated translations of articles from non-Persian language publications. I will not say anything about the other newspapers, for their circulation figures are so low that even if they had meant to have an impact, they have had none.

According to another chronicler of the Iranian newspapers, Mehdi Beheshtipour, press criticism of government officials was so rare that when an official was criticized in a newspaper, most readers would assume that the piece had been written after consultation with the SAVAK or the Royal Court, and that the ‘shattering blow’ at the official concerned had in fact been delivered by another official. There was such deep distrust in the Iranian press in the last decade of the Shah’s rule that it was often said the only truth in the papers was to be found in their death notices.

In the midst of this bleak picture, Iranian journalists of different backgrounds and political views refer to the creation of their trade union, _Sandika-ye Nevissandegan va Khabarnegaran-e Matbou’at_ (The Syndicate of Newspaper Writers and Reporters), as one of the brightest chapters in the history of their profession. The Syndicate was formed in 1962 by 41 journalists, only a handful of whom could have been described as professionals relying on their work for the press as their main source of income. In 1977, the Syndicate had around 500 members, including radio and television journalists. By one account, more than