REVOLUTION DECODED: IRAN'S DIGITAL LANDSCAPE

Small Media
Editors
Bronwen Robertson
James Marchant

Contributors
Kyle Bowen
James Marchant

Research Assistants
Benjamin Graff
Marine Strauss
Raha Zahedpour

Graphic Designers
Isabel Beard
Richard Kahwagi

Arab Media Report
Contributors
Antonello Sacchetti
Valeria Spinelli

1. TENSIONS AND AMBIGUITIES IN IRANIAN MEDIA LAW

by Kyle Bowen

Though political Islam sits at the core of Iranian state ideology, its employment as a basis for media governance and regulation has proven to be problematic, and deeply contentious.

Over the course of the last century, through the Pahlavi era and the Islamic Republic, the Iranian media environment has experienced significant levels of state censorship and control. Government censors have meddled in newspapers, radio, publishing, television, and most recently the internet, in order to curtail popular dissent and defend the ideological and political basis of the state.

This chapter, which is divided into three sections, addresses the legal and constitutional background against which state censorship in Iran takes place. The first section outlines the ideological background and context of the Iranian constitution, the second discusses the provisions of the constitution pertaining to freedom of expression and discusses relevant legislation, and the third offers two case studies to illustrate how these legal and regulatory frameworks function in practice.

Identity Crisis: Media and Culture in the Pre-Revolutionary Period

> *For most of the twentieth century, Britain and Russia, and then the United States, exercised strategic control over Iran's foreign policy and domestic politics, including the creation and maintenance of the Pahlavi dynasty.*
>
> Flynt Lawrence Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, Going to Tehran (2013: 27)

Prior to the 1979 revolution, Iran had been subject to the control of foreign countries and had exogenous values imposed on it. The primary objective of the new constitutional order of the Islamic Republic of Iran was defined through the forceful protection and propagation of Sharia law, Islamic culture and values, and vocal resistance against foreign influence. Iran's media policy was formulated against this historical backdrop.

Before the revolution, much of Iran's modern history was characterised by foreign interference. Iran's geographic location—
at the edge of the Persian Gulf and at the intersection of the Middle East, South Asia and Central Asia—coupled with its ample supply of hydrocarbon reserves, made it a subject of imperial ambitions (Ibid).

'Strangers to Ourselves'

Opposition to the Western social and cultural values imposed by the Pahlavi elite[1] formed the ideological impetus for the revolutionary movement. One of the most influential scholars in this regard was Jalal al-e Ahmad, whose seminal work Occidentosis ("Westoxification") launches what anthropologist Roxanne Varzi describes as "a seething critique of the West's cultural hegemony in the Middle East" (2011: 56).

Al-e Ahmad argued that Islam had historically constituted a bulwark against Western cultural imperialism, and articulated the alienation felt by Iranians upon whom exogenous cultural values had been forcibly imposed.

> *We are like strangers to ourselves, in our food and dress, our homes, our manners, our publications, and, most dangerous, our culture. We try to educate ourselves in the European style and strive to solve every problem as the Europeans would.*
>
> Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Occidentosis, 1962 (1984: 57)

At the same time, Al-e Ahmad noted ruefully that at the turn of the twentieth century, the clerical establishment became increasingly

[1]
Pahlavi-era cultural policies promoted a version of Iranian nationalism that was generally devoid of Islamic features, and which fully embraced many European cultural norms and features in pursuit of an idealised notion of 'modernity'.
For an overview of early Pahlavi-era cultural policies, see (Devos and Werner, Culture and Cultural Politics Under Reza Shah, 2013)

insular and withdrawn from public life. As he explained, "the clergy was the last citadel of resistance against the Europeans, but in the Constitutional Era, with the onslaught of the first wave of the machine, the clergy drew into their shell and so shut out the outside world" (Ibid).[2]

Reiterating the notion that Islam provided an important counterbalance to Western culture and values, and recognising that media can serve as an avenue through which (Islamic) resistance to these foreign values can be articulated, Al-e Ahmad suggests that the clergy could have helped stem the tide of Western cultural invasion through more effective use and control of the media[3].

These two themes—Islam as a source of opposition to Western culture and media as a conduit through which it may be expressed— foreshadow the intellectual underpinnings of the Islamic Republic's media policy.

Towards a Revolutionary Ideology

Al-e Ahmad's work furnished the intellectual foundations of the revolutionary movement and had a profound effect on Ayatollah Khomeini. Varzi argues that Al-e Ahmad's writings provided Khomeini "with an unwavering revolutionary discourse, steeped in strong existential, postcolonial, and Marxist philosophy" (2011: 59). Indeed, echoes of Al-e Ahmad's thought reverberate through Khomeini's own teachings.

> [The Western imperial powers] regarded it as necessary to work for the extirpation of Islam in order to attain their ultimate goals... They felt that the major obstacle in the path of their materialistic ambitions and the chief threat to their political power was nothing but Islam and its ordinances, and the belief of the people in Islam... This slogan of the separation of religion from politics and the demand that Islamic scholars should not intervene in social and political affairs have been formulated and propagated by the imperialists.
> Ayatollah Khomeini, Najaf Lectures, 1970 (in Leverett and Leverett, 2013: 168-9)

For most of the 20th century, powerful foreign nations had interfered in Iran's domestic and foreign affairs. At the same time, Islam was viewed, by Iranians and Westerners alike, as a source of resistance to imperial ambitions. The Islamic Republic placed great value on the preservation

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2

Leading revolutionary ideologists Al-e Ahmad, Ali Shariati and Ayatollah Khomeini each launched scathing attacks on what Shariati called 'Safavid Shi'ite' clergy — clerics concerned more with deliberations over proper Islamic practice regarding topics as trivial as menstruation, childbirth and urination, rather than politics.

For more on these criticisms, see (Ganji, What is Our Problem?, 2011: 127-31)

3

Al-e Ahmad proposed that the clergy should install transmitters in the holy cities of Mashhad and Qom, in order to stoke rebellion against the government, and the state's 'Westernisation' programmes.

of Islamic culture and was acutely concerned about the introduction of Western values.

> *The Islamic state, which came to power after 1979, more than anything else defined itself in a 'cultural' sense. The two aims of the cultural policy of the new state were based on destruction of an imposed 'western' and 'alien' culture, and the replacing of it with a dignified, indigenous, and authentic Islamic culture which had declined under the previous regime. As a result of such broad cultural aims, the state began to develop a whole range of institutions to implement and safeguard the 'Islamic' culture of Iran.*
>
> Gholam Khiabany, Iranian Media: The Paradox of Modernity (2010: 139)

Escape Clauses: The Iranian Constitution and the 1986 Press Law

> *The mass-communication media, radio and television, must serve the diffusion of Islamic culture in pursuit of the evolutionary course of the Islamic Revolution. To this end, the media should be used as a forum for the healthy encounter of different ideas.*
>
> Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, (1979: Preamble)

The introductory phrases of the Iranian Constitution outline the role media is expected in play in the propagation of revolutionary Islamic values. Embedded in these opening refrains are intimations of a core tension that underpins many debates about censorship in the Islamic Republic.

The second sentence gives a nod to the importance of pluralism and free expression in creating an environment that fosters "the healthy encounter of different ideas." However, the first sentence circumscribes media freedom by delineating the primary purpose of the media: "the diffusion of Islamic culture." The phrase "to this end" at the beginning of the second sentence indicates that media diversity is not an end in itself, but rather a means of propagating Islamic values. As Sreberny and Khiabany point out, "although there are references to freedom, dignity, debate and development of human beings, the main aim of the media seems to be the construction of Islamic society and the diffusion of Islamic culture." (2010: 63-4)

This tension between rights and liberties on the one hand, and the protection and preservation of Islamic values on the other, permeates the constitution. Article 23 states: "The investigation of individuals'

beliefs is forbidden, and no one may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief". Yet when it comes to publicly expressing those beliefs, this right is far from absolute.

> *The freedom of expression and dissemination of thoughts in the Radio and Television of the Islamic Republic of Iran must be guaranteed in keeping with the Islamic criteria and the best interests of the country.*
> Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Chapter XII, Article 175

> *Publications and the press have freedom of expression except when it is detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public. The details of this exception will be specified by law.*
> Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Chapter III, Article 24

The above articles demonstrate the ambiguities inherent to the constitution's free speech and media protections, subject as they are to 'exceptions' in the name of ill-defined national and religious interests. The constitution is, therefore, riddled with a number of escape clauses through which the conservative judiciary may dilute any articles that are ostensibly in place to preserve freedom of expression. It wasn't long before the Islamic Republic added an additional layer of media regulation on top of these shaky legal foundations. The landmark Press Law of 1986 is a comprehensive piece of legislation that addresses a wide range of issues related to media law and regulation in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

> *[The media should] campaign against manifestations of imperialistic culture (such as extravagance, dissipation, debauchery, love of luxury, spread of morally corrupt practices, etc.) and to propagate and promote genuine Islamic culture and sound ethical principles.*
> Iranian Press Law, "Mission of the Press", 1986

The 'Mission of the Press' illustrates clear parallels with Al-e Ahmad's vision of an activist clergy who would "arm itself with the weapons of its enemy" and "translate general religious principle into specific injunction through its own media outlets" (Al-e Ahmad, op. cit.: 57).

In both texts, the media is viewed as a tool to combat Western cultural hegemony, as well as a means with which to propagate Islamic values. The subsequent chapter of the law, which addresses the rights of the press, faithfully adheres to this framework.

> *The press have the right to publish the opinions, constructive criticisms,*
> *suggestions and explanations of individuals and government officials*
> *for public information while duly observing the Islamic teachings and*
> *the best interest of the community.*
> Iranian Press Law, Chapter III, Article 3, 1986

Pursuant to Article 24 of the Constitution, which affirms the right to free expression "except when it is detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public," the Press Law lists nine examples of topics the press is forbidden to broach.

1. Publishing atheistic articles or issues which are prejudicial to Islamic codes, or, promoting subjects which might damage the foundation of the Islamic Republic;

2. Propagating obscene and religiously forbidden acts and publishing indecent pictures and issues which violate public decency;

3. Propagating luxury and extravagance;

4. Creating discord between and among social walks of life, especially by raising ethnic and racial issues;

5. Encouraging and instigating individuals and groups to act against the security, dignity and interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran within or outside the country;

6. Disclosing and publishing classified documents, orders and issues, or, disclosing the secrets of the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic, military maps and fortifications, publishing closed-door deliberations of the Islamic Consultative Assembly or private proceedings of courts of justice and investigations conducted by judicial authorities without legal permit;

7. Insulting Islam and its sanctities, or, offending the Leader of the Revolution and recognized religious authorities (senior Islamic jurisprudents);

8. Publishing libel against officials, institutions, organizations and individuals in the country or insulting legal or real persons who are lawfully respected, even by means of pictures or caricatures; and

9. Committing plagiarism or quoting articles from the deviant press, parties and groups which oppose Islam (inside and outside the country) in such a manner as to propagate such ideas (the limits of such offenses shall be defined by the executive by-law).Iranian Press Law, Chapter IV, Article 6, 1986

The Press Law also prohibits printing and publishing without a license *(Article 7)*, and delineates the purview of the Press Supervisory Board, which is responsible for examining applications for press licenses and assessing the competency of the applicant and the managing director.[4]

Constructive Criticisms

Part of the judicial ambiguity stems from the Islamic Republic's administrative environment in which several regulatory bodies have overlapping, and sometimes conflicting remits[5].

Khiabany explains that in post-1979 Iran, parallel organisations were established alongside existing institutions: the Revolutionary Guards alongside the Army, the Revolutionary Committees alongside the Police, revolutionary courts alongside general courts, and various foundations that competed directly with government ministries (2010: 144-5). The existence of such parallel organisations with competing visions of their respective role within the Islamic Republic inevitably produces a degree of institutional tension between the various factions. As Sussan Siavoshi observes, "although every faction declared its commitment to Islamic cultural ideals, all consensus vanished when it came to the question of what these ideals were and which policies were required to achieve them" (1997: 513).

These observations point to another tension in Iranian media law: not only is there disagreement between various agencies over which policies could best promote Islamic ideals and which agencies could best execute them, there is also a lack of consensus regarding the nature of those ideals. One of the most striking features of Article 4 of the Press Law, the stated purpose of which was to specify the prohibitions on press freedom, is the broad and ambiguous nature of many of its provisions.

For example, the prohibition on "Insulting Islam and its sanctities, or, offending the Leader of the Revolution and recognized religious authorities" could be understood as a ban on any criticism of the

[4]
In another example of the endemic ambiguity in the realm of Iranian press law, it is unclear whether the Press Supervisory Board's authority is limited to granting and revoking press licenses, or if it is also entitled to render judgements on press offenses.

[5]
For a comprehensive review of the competing regulatory and judicial institutions dealing with press law violations, see (Khiabany, 2010: 144-147).

government, given that the government is itself largely constituted by religious authorities. And while Section Two prohibits publishing material that "violate[s] public decency," public decency is not defined.

Moreover, Article 3 codifies the right of the press to publish "constructive criticisms... while duly observing the Islamic teachings and the best interest of the community," however it is not specified which Islamic teachings are most important, nor is there any enumeration of what constitutes "constructive criticism" or the "best interests of the community."

The textual ambiguity of the Iranian Constitution and the Press Law is a contributory factor to the tension that underpins debates and discussions about censorship, the cultivation of Islamic culture, and resistance against Western values.

In summary, Iran's history of domination by foreign powers left Iranian intellectuals acutely concerned with combating Western values while they set about forcefully cultivating and propagating an indigenous culture. For scholars such as Al-e Ahmad and religious leaders including Khomeini, Islam fulfilled both objectives in that it represented a bulwark against Western cultural imperialism and a potential source of indigenous socio-cultural values. This was the ideological impulse that animated the creation of the Islamic Republic's Constitution.

Translating these ideological commitments into concrete policies proved a daunting challenge and the process was often fraught with conflict. Though political Islam sits at the core of Iranian state ideology, its employment as a basis for media governance and regulation has proven to be problematic, and deeply contentious.

> *The problems with the Iranian media and ICT environments are intertwined with the broader legal framework in the country. The Islamic Republic Constitution, which allows and recognises political participation and keeps alive the rhetoric of the popular revolutionary mobilisation of 1979, nonetheless keeps an ultimate veto for the ruling clergy on the basis that sovereignty belongs not to the people but to God, and in reality to his representatives and the guardians of his will. There is nothing in the holy text as to what Islamic media ...should look like. What has been offered is made-up law in the interest of the Islamic Republic, and the press has been regulated and controlled as such.*
> Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany, Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran, (2010: 85)

The Law in Practice: Case Studies

Case One: The Narenji Bloggers

Narenji[6] was one of Iran's leading websites for gadget and technology news. However, on 2 December 2013 the popular site abruptly suspended its activities after 7 of its editors were arrested by the Revolutionary Guard. The local judiciary in the province of Kerman, where the website's headquarters were based, announced that the staff had been sentenced to 1 to 11 years in prison. It remains unclear whether or not they were allowed access to lawyers or due process (Kamali Dehghan, 2014a).

Another ambiguity in this case concerns the charges on which the bloggers were convicted. Yadollah Movahed, a member of Kerman's local judiciary told reporters that Narenji's editors were "providing content to anti-state and anti-Iranian media," adding that they "had direct contact with satellite channels such as BBC Persian" (in Kamali Dehghan, 2014b). The head of Kerman's justice department, Ali Tavakoli, insisted that the arrested bloggers had confessed to "being tasked with fuelling social tensions, spreading doubts and misrepresentations" (in Kamali Dehghan, 2014a). Specific details of these transgressions were not provided.

The vague wording of the Iranian Constitution and the Press Law gives authorities a broad remit to censor content they deem unacceptable. Yet the relatively apolitical nature of the website raises the question of what it was about this website the authorities found so objectionable. The justification cited by the Kerman justice department draws on a well-established trope in Iranian jurisprudence: the threat of Western soft power. In a press conference, Tavakoli repeated emphasized the group's alleged relationship with BBC Persian:

> This gang was running a number of projects and plans for anti-revolutionary Iranians based abroad, especially for the BBC Persian under the guise of legitimate activities.
>
> Financial aid for this group was usually provided from London under the pretext of charitable donations. The director of the team was an individual who has served the BBC as a mentor and teacher in a number of countries such as Malaysia, India and Afghanistan and his travels to these countries was paid for by British intelligence services.
>
> Ali Tavakoli, Head of Kerman Justice Department (in Kamali Dehghan, Ibid)

The references to London, the BBC, and British intelligence services reinforce the impression of Western influence as a threat to Iran. While the BBC has denied any involvement in Narenji's editorial policy, (Kamali Dehghan, Ibid) claims of Western meddling in Iran's media resonate strongly in Iranian public discourse.[7] The justification used to arrest the Narenji bloggers is therefore eminently compatible with the philosophy that laid the intellectual foundation upon which the Islamic Republic's constitutional order was constructed.

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In a narrative tradition fitting neatly with Jalal al-e Ahmad's conception of an Iranian culture imperiled by its failure to guard against the invasion of toxic Western values, Iranian media sources frequently characterise Western powers as the conspiratorial puppet masters behind domestic crises. For more see: (Zonis and Joseph, 1994)

The broad nature of the Press Law gives officials a substantial amount of latitude in deciding which media outlets require censorship. This is not to suggest that Iranian officials always present a united front when fighting censorship battles: when there is tension between various segments of the Iranian government, cases of media regulation often become sites of contestation between competing factions.

The textual ambiguity of the Press Law grants judicial authorities the power not only to crack down on speech it deems unacceptable, but also to challenge other elements in the Iranian political establishment. In the case of the Narenji bloggers, there is some evidence to suggest that this type of institutional wrangling played a role.

Hassan Rouhani, elected as Iran's president in 2013, has made moderate reform a centerpiece of his platform. He has made diplomatic overtures towards the United States, and has pushed for a more liberal internet policy.

> *Some people think we can fix [our] problems by building walls, but when you create filters, they create proxies... this [current policy of censorship] does not work. Force does not produce results.*
> President Hassan Rouhani, 7 September 2014 (in The National, 2014)

Rouhani's ostensibly moderate agenda has sparked a backlash among Iranian conservatives, with battles over the future of the internet in Iran emerging as key sites of contestation between reformists and hardliners. Some analysts believe the case of the Narenji bloggers to be an illustration of this dynamic.

> *Narenji's arrest by the local Kermani Revolutionary Guard may be a deliberate response by local radicals against the Rouhani*

> *administration's encouragement of tech entrepreneurs: a signal that*
> *makes clear that Tehran should not go too far in its moderation.*
> (O'Brian, op. cit.)

> *I believe the arrests, especially of the Narenji team, to be part of the*
> *reaction of the hardliners within the Iranian establishment to the*
> *attempts of President Rouhani to move towards the opening up of*
> *cyberspace and the media sphere; and to relax the previous rigid*
> *attitude towards contacts with foreign institutions.*
> (Kamali Dehghan, 2014a)

Crucially, the ability of a conservative judiciary to undermine a
moderate president in this way is predicated on the vast interpretative
discretion that Iran's broadly-worded legislation and constitution afford.

Case Two: Marzieh Rasouli

Marzieh Rasouli is a female Iranian journalist who wrote primarily
about the arts for several reformist newspapers, including Shargh
and Etemaad. On 8 July 2014, she reported to Tehran's Evin prison to
begin serving a two year sentence for 'spreading anti-government
propaganda.' (Kamali Dehghan, 2014c) This was not her first offense; Rasouli
was also arrested in January 2012, along with two other journalists,
Parastoo Dokoohaki and Sahamoldin Borghani. The day before they
were released after posting bail, the Revolutionary Guards put out a
statement accusing them of collaborating with the BBC and British
Intelligence. (Reporters Without Borders, 2013)

As with the Narenji bloggers, the fear of Western meddling in Iranian
society, enshrined in both the philosophy of Al-e Ahmad and the
Constitution of the Islamic Republic, can be marshalled to justify all
manner of censorship. Although the BBC was not mentioned in the list
of charges that precipitated Rasouli's more recent arrest, intimations of
the concern for preserving Iran's indigenous cultural and political order
can be detected in the accusations that were levelled against her.

According to The Guardian, Rasouli was charged with "spreading
propaganda" against the ruling system and "disturbing public order"
(Kamali Dehghan, 2014c). While "spreading propaganda" and "disturbing
public order" are expressly prohibited by the Press Law, the broad
nature of these prohibitions leaves judicial authorities substantial

prosecutorial discretion. The result is that censorship laws are often enforced in an ad hoc and inconsistent way.

There are two factors that compound the impression of arbitrariness in the case of Rasouli's prosecution. Firstly, she was informed of her sentence over the phone, which came after an appeal hearing at which she was forbidden to speak. Secondly, she received a much harsher sentence than fellow journalist Parastoo Dokouhaki, who was facing the same charges. Dokouhaki was sentenced to probation and a ban on all political activities (Mackey, 2014).

> *Iran's president, Hassan Rouhani, has spoken of the need to relax restrictions on free speech, but the country's judiciary remains dominated by conservatives who have pursued similar charges against other journalists.*
> Robert Mackey, New York Times (2014)

Alongside the issue of the textual ambiguity of the Constitution and Press Law, one possible explanation for such inconsistent application of the law can be found in the tensions between various factions of Iran's domestic politics. The election of the moderate Hassan Rouhani has engendered something of a backlash among Iranian conservatives, who are seeking to reassert their power through the judiciary. This illustrates another parallel to the case of the Narenji bloggers. Broadly-worded prohibitions on press freedom present censorship battles as venues for confrontation not just between the regime and the people, but also between various factions of the regime itself.

Joining the Dots

Given the history of foreign interference in Iranian society, the desire to codify into law the imperative to cultivate Iranian values as well as the responsibility to protect against the imposition of Western culture is theoretically justifiable. In practice, however, the semantic flexibility that characterises phrases such as "Islamic values" and "foreign press" leaves judicial authorities substantial discretion to prosecute journalists.

As the cases of the Narenji bloggers and Marzieh Rasouli illustrate, such discretion has led not only to the arbitrary enforcement of the law, but has also enabled various government factions to use press regulation as a pretext to augment their own power at the expense of their rivals. While the prosecution of the Narenji bloggers and Marzieh

Rasouli may have been harsh and arbitrary, they were not necessarily unconstitutional. Judicial authorities may have enforced laws in an expedient or cynical way, but, in point of fact, "spreading propaganda against the regime" and "disturbing public order" are indeed explicitly prohibited by the Press Law, which, pursuant to Article 24 of the Constitution, delineates the exceptions to the guarantee of press freedom.

The myriad issues relating to censorship in Iran, from arbitrary enforcement to judicial activism, ultimately stem from a common source — the constitution itself. The broadly-worded prohibitions against "spreading propaganda" or "creating social discord" may have been formulated in an effort to foster and preserve an authentic Iranian culture against the rapacious advance of Western values, yet in practice they have given the judiciary considerable latitude to arbitrarily determine censorship policy and to assert its institutional authority against the Rouhani administration.

Many of the issues related to Iran's press regulation policies are common to nascent nations in the Global South. The imperative of the media to support the revolution is an important part of nation-building, aiming to foment a sense of national pride and shore up support for the incipient constitutional order. However, as the new political order begins to assert itself more confidently, this approach often undermines press freedom, and can be cynically exploited to justify all sorts of censorship. The cases of the Narenji bloggers and Marzieh Rasouli clearly illustrate this risk.

The Islamic Republic is still relatively young and we may see changes in various aspects of media policy as it continues to develop. However, it will be difficult to satisfactorily resolve the censorship issues illustrated in this chapter so long as the current constitutional settlement remains in place, plagued as it is by textual ambiguity and an inherent vulnerability to the whims of Iran's conservative religious judiciary. ◊

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2. INTERNET CENSORSHIP IN IRAN: PREVENTATIVE, INTERCEPTIVE, AND REACTIVE

by Kyle Bowen and James Marchant

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The Iranian authorities adopt a triangulated approach to internet censorship and surveillance. Preventative, interceptive, and reactive measures are intertwined and form a coherent overall strategy for internet control.

When Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web, he built a model that was open, decentralised and accessible to all. Today, that vision is being subverted in the face of a dramatic expansion of state interference in the digital realm. Increasingly, governments are using the internet to spy on their citizens, and in few places is this more apparent than Iran.[1]

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All countries monitor and/or censor the internet, but the Iranian case is quite exceptional in its scope and intent. The political establishment has identified a number of cultural and political threats inherent in the structure of the internet and has moved to regulate it accordingly.

Iran's pervasive programme of online censorship has seen it labelled as one of the 'twelve enemies of the Internet' by Reporters Without Borders (2012a), and described as the 'least free' country in terms of internet freedom by Freedom House (Kelly and Cook, 2011).

The Iranian government frequently cracks down on platforms and content it considers to counter the values of the state. In other media, this is a fairly straight forward task: authors must seek permission from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance before publishing their books, musicians require authorisation before releasing their work, and domestically-produced television is controlled entirely by the national broadcaster, IRIB. The internet, however, provides Iranian users a link to the outside world that is far more difficult to control.

This chapter seeks to answer a number of key questions about the past, present and future of internet censorship in the Islamic Republic, identifying the state authorities' rationale for imposing censorship, the tools used to enforce it, and the individuals and government bodies that are responsible for overseeing it.

A Tangled Web: The Chaos of Internet Policy Making in Iran

A complex network of bodies determines state internet censorship policy in Iran, each holding a set of rather poorly-defined powers and responsibilities, resulting in numerous disputes between different sets of policy makers and enforcers. To compound this confusion, a number of influential policy-makers sit on several committees simultaneously, each with overlapping agendas, responsibilities, and approaches to internet policy.

This institutional chaos has manifested itself in several examples of confused government policy, resulting in some very high-profile power struggles between key political actors. The conflicting messages emanating from the government regarding social media illustrate this. For instance, while Facebook and Twitter are officially blocked in Iran, with users forced to deploy illegal circumvention tools to access them, many senior officials openly flout these rules for their own self-promotion.[2]

2

Many high-ranking officials maintain accounts on forbidden social media platforms, including the Iranian president, Mr Hassan Rouhani (twitter.com/Rouhani_ir), Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (facebook.com/jzarif) and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (instagram.com/khamenei_ir and twitter.com/khamenei_ir)

Statements from high-profile officials are also contributing to the confusion around social media policy. In a statement in March 2014 Ali Jannati, the Rouhani-appointed Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance spoke of the need to unblock Facebook, conceding that at least 4 million Iranians already make use of the platform, and arguing that the government is fighting a losing battle by attempting to maintain the ban (Fararu, 2014). President Rouhani struck a similar chord in a televised address in September 2014:

> *Some people think we can fix these problems by building walls, but when you create filters, they create proxies... this [current policy] does not work. Force does not produce results.*
> President Hassan Rouhani (The National, 2014)

Hardliners remain staunchly opposed to any relaxation in national filtering policy. In response to Jannati's speech, Abdolsamad Khoramabadi, the Secretary of the 'Commission to Determine the Instances of Criminal Content' (CDICC) - Iran's official censorship body - responded that there are no plans to reverse the policy of filtering sites such as Facebook.

The War Over WhatsApp

In May 2014, the CDICC passed a motion to ban the mobile messaging application WhatsApp, a decision opposed by Rouhani and Mahmoud Vaezi, his ICT Minister. The subsequent policy confusion and internal political wrangling provide a particularly clear example of the complex and often chaotic processes involved in formulating and executing censorship policy in Iran.

The CDICC initially proposed the ban of WhatsApp on April 30 2014, shortly after Facebook's $19bn acquisition of the messaging app.[3] President Rouhani challenged the CDICC's proposal, ordering the plans to block WhatsApp to be abandoned in a meeting of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC), which he chairs (Khodabakhshi, 2014). Whilst all the other censorship bodies are nominally subordinate to the SCC, this is the first occasion in which either the President or the Council has chosen to intervene publicly in filtering issues. Consequently, Rouhani's move was extremely controversial, and contributed to widespread confusion over the roles and responsibilities of the SCC and the CDICC.[4]

The authority of the SCC has been asserted most vociferously by members of Rouhani's cabinet, with ICT Minister Mahmood Vaezi arguing that President Rouhani and the SCC are responsible for managing all policy relating to social networks and that CDICC must comply with all SCC rulings (Tasnim News, 2014a). However, the SCC's authority is not universally accepted, and a number of figures have denounced Rouhani for his direct intervention. Hardline CDICC Secretary Abdolsamad Khoramabadi once again emerged as a leading critic of the government, insisting that the President lacks the authority to overrule CDICC orders, and demanding that the government execute his body's rulings (Fars News, 2014a).

In the visualisation overleaf, we plot out the chaotic structure of Iran's online censorship and surveillance system, and the various authorities sturgling to control it.

[3]
In addition to having been blocked for its association with Facebook, some have argued that a primary motivation behind the decision to block WhatsApp was to protect domestic mobile service providers from a decrease in revenue by forcing users to continue texting rather than making use of free messaging services.

[4]
The roles and responsibilities of Iran's internet policy-making bodies are not clearly demarcated. This ambiguity has ignited inter-factional and inter-committee conflicts and resulted in the formation of muddled and ineffective government policy. As a result, Iranian internet users are never entirely sure of the boundaries and limitations governing their online behaviour.

SUPREME LEADER

SUPREME COUNCIL OF CYBERSPACE

COMMISSION TO DETERMINE THE INSTANCES OF CRIMINAL CONTENT

NATIONAL IRANIAN POLICE

NAJA

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY MINISTRY

TELECOMMUNICATION INFRASTRUCTURE COMPANY

IRANIAN REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS

IRGC

INTERNET SERVICE PROVIDERS

USER
USER
USER
USER
USER
USER
USER

IRANIAN CYBER POLICE
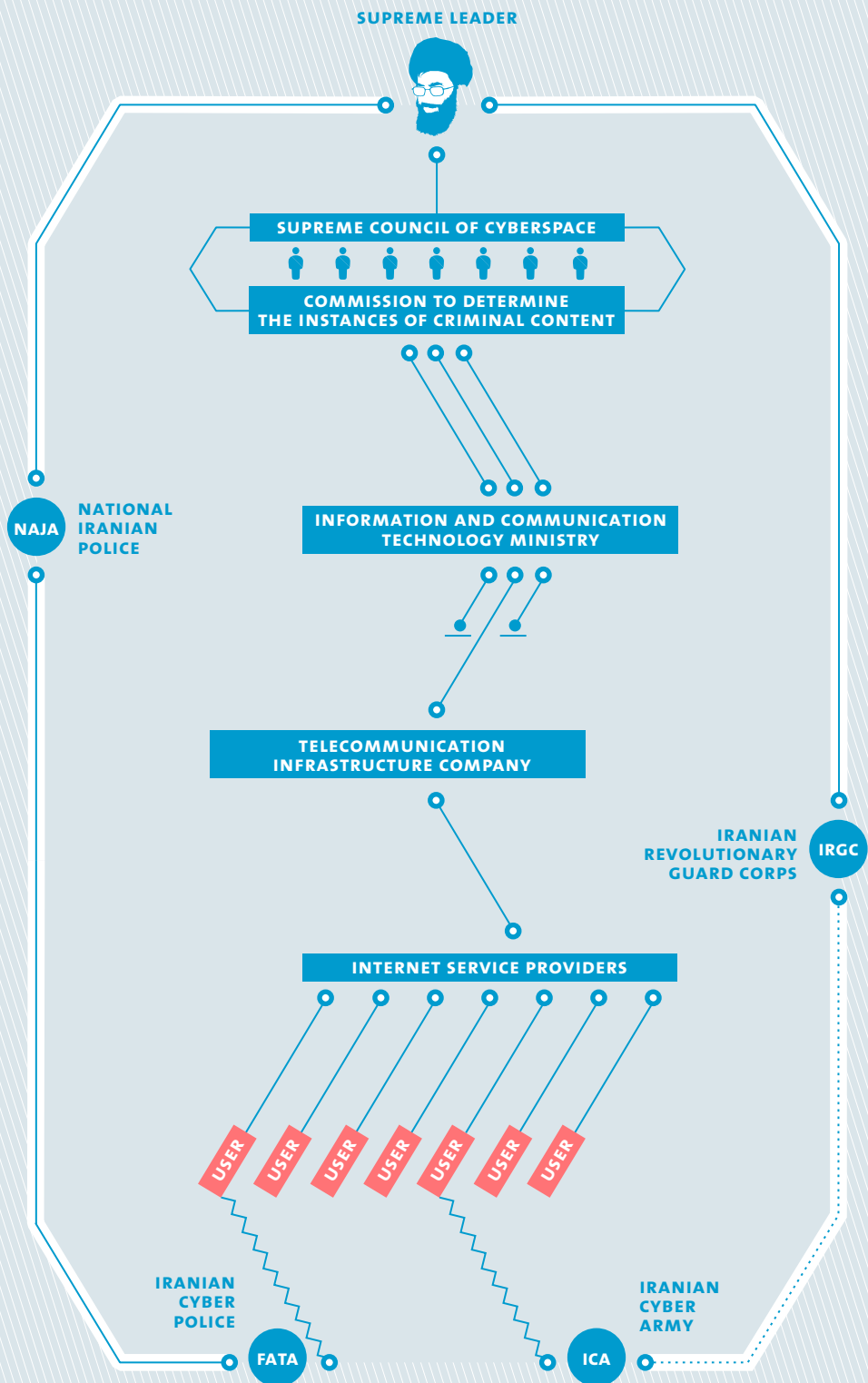
FATA

IRANIAN CYBER ARMY

ICA

figure 1: **WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR CENSORSHIP?**

Policy Making (Official)

Supreme Leader (SL)
Most powerful decision maker in Iran has legislative and policy-setting powers over internet communications. Appoints directors of key military, security and governmental posts involved in bodies that censor the internet such as:

• The ommission to Determine the Instances of Criminal Content (CDICC)
• The Iran Cyber Police - FATA

Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC)
Established as the result of a directive issued by the Supreme Leader in March 2012.

Top policy-making body for cyber activities in Iran.

Formed by SL to develop the state's domestic and international cyber policies

Commission to Determine the Instances of Criminal Content (CDICC)
Responsible for identifying web content to be filtered and blocked.

More conservative than the SCC creates lists of illegal websites and online content that violates public morals, contradicts Islam, threatens national security, criticises public officials or organisations, or promotes either cyber crimes or the use of circumvention tools.

The SCC and CDICC share seven common members which illustrates the lack of a coherent division of powers and responsibilities between policy makers and those implementing censorship decisions.

Executive (Official)

Information and Communication Technology Ministry (ICT)
Responsible for executing the filtering list from the CDICC.

Responsible for launching the National Information Network (SHOMA) Manages the Internet network and all communication infrastructures.

Telecommunication Infrastructure Company (TIC)
The only company that has exclusive rights to buy Internet bandwidth for Iran.

Cyber Police (FATA)
A division of Iran's police department established in January 2011 to combat cybercrimes such as scams, fraud, etc.

Executive (Unofficial)

Iranian Cyber Army (ICA)
An underground network of pro-regime cyber activists, hackers and bloggers. Monitors the internet and launches cyber attacks on opposition and anti-Islamic websites.

Operates under the Intelligence Unit of the Revolutionary Guard.

Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)
The branch of Iran's military established not for the purpose of defending Iran from external threats, but instead with the purpose of upholding the 'Islamic system' of the Republic.

The intelligence wing of the IRGC is widely understood to be involved in supporting and co-ordinating the offensive cyber-warfare activities of Iran's 'Cyber Army', although no official relationship has been publically confirmed.

Neutral

Internet Service Providers (ISPs)
Buys Internet bandwidth from TIC and sells to Iranians.

Plays no role in internet censorship

CDICC

We have passed motion ordering the **ICT Ministry** to block **WhatsApp**

ICT Minister Vaezi

On the request of **President Hassan Rouhani**, the Ministry refuses to block WhatsApp.

CDICC Secretary Abdolsamad Khoramabadi

The President does not have the power to suspend **CDICC**'s orders, **Rouhani**'s government (including the **ICT Ministry**) must execute the committee's rulings!

ICT Minister Vaezi

No! The CDICC must comply with all the rulings of the **SCC** and **President Rouhani**.

SCC member Alireza Shahmirzae claims that the SCC has not yet made a decision about blocking WhatsApp.

A member of CDICC

The committee has no current plans to block mobile chat apps such as WhatsApp.

According to an unnamed CDICC member, the committee voted against blocking WhatsApp in its most recent meeting.

figure 2: **WHATSAPP CASE STUDY**

April 30
CDICC passes motion ordering the ICT
Ministry to block WhatsApp

May 4
ICT Minister Vaezi announced that the
Ministry would not block WhatsApp, on the
request of President Hassan Rouhani.

May 4
CDICC Secretary Abdolsamad Khoramabadi
said that the President does not have
the power to suspend CDICC's orders,
and insisted that Rouhani's government
(including the ICT Ministry) must execute
the committee's rulings.

May 6
ICT Minister Vaezi stated that the CDICC
must comply with all the rulings of the SCC
and President Rouhani.

June 17
SCC member Alireza Shahmirzae said that
the SCC has not yet made a decision about
the blocking of WhatsApp.

June 18
A member of CDICC stated that the
committee has no current plans to block
social mobile apps such as WhatsApp.
According to the unnamed member,
the committee voted against blocking
WhatsApp in its most recent meeting.

For Every Occasion: Iran's Censorship Toolkit

The Iranian authorities adopt a triangulated approach to internet censorship and surveillance. Preventative, interceptive, and reactive measures are intertwined and inform a coherent overall strategy for internet control:

- *Preventative measures* are designed to stop Iranian users from accessing forbidden content in the first place, and are not geared towards monitoring and threatening individual uses.

- *Interceptive measures* exist to silently track and thwart individual users who have managed to work around the state's preventative security infrastructure.

- *Reactive measures* are used to gather intelligence on general internet usage patterns, which are then fed back into the development of preventative and interceptive structures. These measures also target individual users whom state authorities have identified as persons of interest.

Nipped in the Bud: Preventative Methods

The primary purpose of preventative methods of internet censorship is to prevent Iranian netizens from accessing content deemed 'immoral' by the religious establishment. Preventative methods do not punish or harm the user; their purpose is simply to make content inaccessible, or to at least complicate access.

DNS redirection and URL blacklisting

Early technology used by the Iranian government to block online content was clumsy, and only capable of filtering entire websites at the domain level.[5]

5

Previously, ISPs were given lists of URLs to block, and words to ban from search requests. DNS redirection was then used to forward illegal web requests to a webpage managed by censors.

The responsibility for this DNS redirection process has since been transferred to the Telecommunications Infrastructure Company (TIC), the state-run company responsible for purchasing Iranian bandwidth from international networks and selling it on to Iranian ISPs (Islamic Parliament Research Centre, 2014: 16). The TIC applies its content filters prior to selling bandwidth on to ISPs, meaning that by the time bandwidth reaches ISPs, it has already been 'cleaned'.

Content-control software, HTTP host and keyword filtering

The employment of content-control software, along with HTTP host and keyword filtering, remains the most widely used method of filtering at the present time. With HTTP host and keyword filtering, authorities block access to certain sites by manipulating connections based on their HTTP host headers, and to URLs containing certain keywords.[6] This task is performed by content-control software installed by the TIC, which automatically inspects and filters web content, as well as monitoring IP traffic and internet-user activities.

In 2013, the Small Media design team conducted research on the 100 most-viewed pages in Persian on Wikipedia. Wikipedia isn't blocked in Iran, but specific pages within it are. To test the links for filtering we set up a VPN connection to a computer based inside Iran. Wikipedia, a website with a 'radically open' approach, poses a stark contrast to Iran's closed society.

Small Media produced an infographic from the data called '*Closed Society Meets Open Information*'. Our analysis demonstrated the types of information the government seeks to block. The results showed Wikipedia to be predominantly 'open', with only 16 out of the 100 pages blocked. 10 of these were related to sexuality ('sexual intercourse', 'homosexuality', 'vulva', 'masturbation'), with the remaining 6 pages suggesting Iran's nervousness around access to historical and religious information (Small Media, 2013a).[7]

Broadband speed limitations

Preventative censorship is not limited to content filtering; infrastructural shortcomings and legislation also inhibit access. In 2006, the Ministry of Communication and Information and Communications Technology forbade ISPs from providing private users with internet connections faster than 128 KB/s. There are exceptions to this rule, with professionals and students being granted access to more bandwidth.

Compounding the issue of broadband speed limitations is the fact that circumvention tools, which are used by around 70% of young internet users to evade government filtering (ISNA, 2014), dramatically decrease internet speeds. In conjunction with existing speed restrictions, it is incredibly difficult for the average Iranian user to access multimedia content online.

[6]
The list of prohibited keywords originally only contained terms frequently used to access adult content, but this list has been expanded in the wake of the unrest that accompanied the 2009 presidential elections.

[7]
The other blocked pages were Cyrus the Great, Facebook, Ruhollah Khomeini, Suleiman I, Shahin Najafi, and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

PREVENTATIVE METHODS

INTERCEPTIVE METHODS

REACTIVE METHODS

BROADBAND SPEED LIMITATIONS

DNS REDIRECTION

URL 'BLACKLIST'

CONTENT-CONTROL SOFTWARE

HTTP HOST AND KEYWORD FILTERING

TRAFFIC ANALYSIS

MAN-IN-THE-MIDDLE (MITM)

DEEP PACKET INSPECTION

RESPOND TO PATTERNS IN USERS-BEHAVIOUR

PERIODIC BLOCKING OF SSL

CONNECTION THROTTLING

ARREST OF INTERNET ACTIVISTS AND DEVELOPERS

figure 3: **METHODS OF INTERNET CENSORSHIP**

Preventative Methods

Methods used to prevent forbidden content from reaching Iranian users in the first place.

URL 'blacklist'
When a user attempts to access blocked content, they are automatically redirected to a webpage managed by censors

DNS redirection
Telecommunications Infrastructure Company (TIC) is given a list of URLs, which it blocks prior to allocating bandwidth to ISPs

Content-control software
Software used by TIC to automatically inspect, filter, and block sites

HTTP host and keyword filtering
URLs and headers containing specific text are automatically filtered by TIC

Broadband speed limitations
ICT Ministry forbids speeds faster than 128kbps for home users

Interceptive Methods

Methods used to monitor and block forbidden content from reaching users as they access it.

Deep Packet Inspection
Technology used to monitor, track and block internet traffic

MITM (man-in-the-middle)
Method used to intercept online communications

Traffic Analysis
Analysis of sites that are being viewed most frequently

Reactive Methods

Methods of censorship and control used to respond to users after they have gained access to restricted content.

Respond to patterns in user-behaviour
Traffic analysis and DPI surveillance informs the creation of updated blacklists and filtered keywords

Arrest of internet activists and developers
The state has arrested a number of cyber-activists working against online censorship

Periodic blocking of SSL
Websites with SSL security protocols are periodically blocked inside Iran, forcing users to use insecure websites instead.

Connection throttling
At moments of political or social tension, connection speeds are throttled to limit online engagement

These preventative filtering methods aim to strangle off the internet as an alternative space for accessing restricted content and engaging in activity deemed 'subversive' by state authorities. Despite users' best efforts to get around the state's filtering techniques, there is little they can do to avoid the frustrations of Iran's glacial broadband speeds.

Cat and Mouse: Interceptive Methods

The Iranian authorities also use a far more sinister tactic in their censorship regime: data interception. Unlike filtering and other forms of preventative censorship, interceptive methods are active, invisible, and unpredictable.

Deep Packet Inspection (DPI)

The technology that enables this interceptive form of censorship is called Deep Packet Inspection (DPI), and it is used to analyse email content and track browsing history. Analysts have commented that DPI surveillance methods have been in practice since the 2009 post-election unrest (Parsons, 2011).[8]

8

In 2012 the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) put forward international standards for the use of DPI technology (ITU, 2012), but these standards do not delineate how specific technologies should or could be used. There has been very little consideration for the implications of standardising the use of this technology.

The journalist and cyber-activist Walid al-Saqaf described the implications of expanded DPI surveillance in a February 2012 interview with Arseh Sevom.

> *The idea behind [DPI] is if you access a certain protocol or a particular service, then the Iranian government actually goes into the header or the inner traffic and analyzes them bit-by-bit to check what is going through, and then compare that to a stack of black list arguments, and if it matches it closes the network. That has caused a tremendous internet slowdown in Iran.*
>
> Arseh Sevom, Breaking and Bending Censorship with Walid al-Saqaf (2012)

9

In MITM attacks, the attacker takes position in the middle of a private interaction between two endpoints. Unbeknownst to both users, all information filters through this MITM.

Man-in-the-Middle

DPI is also the technology behind 'man-in-the-middle-attacks' (MITM).[9] These MITM attacks are often small in scope but can last for protracted periods. In 2011, an Iranian Google user was informed by a Chrome security alert that the certification for their Gmail account was fraudulent. Upon further investigation, they discovered that the fraudulent certificates had been in place for two months, meaning that attackers may have been privy to the user's private conversations and

email exchanges for the entire period (Schoen and Galperin, 2014).
The authorities have not claimed responsibility for this MITM attack,
but assaults such as these reveal the online risks faced by activists
and the bounty of information that the state could gather from
unsuspecting users.

Anonymous or Not?

There are a number of tools available to Iranian users to help them
evade these pervasive surveillance techniques. Tor, one program
commonly used for this purpose, directs internet traffic through a free,
worldwide, volunteer network consisting of more than five thousand
relays, concealing the user's location and internet usage from anyone
conducting network surveillance or traffic analysis. In this manner, Tor
enables Iranian users to securely access filtered and restricted segments
of the internet.

However, such methods are not without their drawbacks. Using
circumvention tools slows browsing speeds down to a crawl. And whilst
governments are generally incapable of decoding anonymised traffic
online, they can easily distinguish between encrypted and unencrypted
traffic, meaning that they can block all encrypted traffic with relative
ease.

The Iranian government did so for two months in July/August 2014,
preventing 75% of the network's estimated 40,000 daily users from
connecting to Tor (Alimardani, 2014). However, online activists quickly
devised a solution: they began to employ 'pluggable transports' - Tor
connections that connect to the wider network using a hidden pathway
known as a 'bridge' - making it far more difficult for authorities to
detect and block traffic.[10]

10

Tor has gained 3000 new users since
it was blocked in July, all of whom are
using bridges outside of the regular Tor
connections (Ibid, 2014).

In this way, Iranian users are often able to sidestep the government's
efforts to intercept and block their online activities. Yet in spite
of this, state authorities continue to work to gather information
and intelligence about users' web habits, in an effort to revise and
strengthen Iran's online security apparatus.

Feedback Loop: Reactive Methods

In addition to preventative and interceptive methods of internet censorship, Iran also deploys reactive methods. Instances of reactive censorship typically arise either in response to long-term patterns in user behaviour, or to high-profile cases that unnerve the authorities. Reactive censorship is the most difficult to assess, as it is by nature less consistent than other forms of filtering in that it responds to the strategies and evasive tactics utilised by Iranian users. While the high-profile arrests of internet activists and developers might serve to deter other internet users from breaking the 'rules', technology also plays a large role in reactive censorship.

SSL and the 'Second Wave' of Internet Censorship

Iran's internet censorship methods have increased dramatically in sophistication in recent years, as authorities have been working to counter the efforts of users to gain free and unrestricted access to forbidden content.

Many users have been able to protect themselves from MITM attacks by making use of Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) protocols.[11] The Iranian authorities have periodically blocked SSL websites, offering a clear indication of their intentions. By blocking SSL protocols, netizens are forced to use insecure sites, putting themselves at greater risk of MITM attacks. The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran argues that the government's efforts to undermine user security marks a profound shift in government censorship policy.

[11]
SSL protocols are security protocols that transmit encrypted information between users and websites (identified by their URLs, which begin with 'https'), thereby enabling Iranian citizens to share information online in a secure manner.

> *SSL blocking can… be seen as the second wave of Internet blocking in Iran. Until now, the Iranian regime has only blocked websites, which in its worst form constituted censorship and a violation of the users' right to free access to information. But in this second wave of blocking, the blocking of security protocols is targeting the very security of Internet users.*
> ICHRI, "Iran's New Methods of Internet Filtering Put Users at Risk" (2014)

This 'second wave' of integrated internet censorship and surveillance is also reflected in the 2009 Computer Crimes Law, which requires ISPs to retain records of all data uploaded or downloaded by users for a 3-month period. Coupled with the repeated blocking of SSL protocols, ISPs are able to retain access to vast reams of personal data, all of which is accessible to the government.

Cracking Down

The availability of all this information allows the government to
exercise impunity in cracking down on dissidents and cyber activists.
Access to vast repositories of user data is enabling the government to
rapidly identify suspects, and then arm themselves with mountains of
evidence for use in interrogations and trials.

Saeed Pourheydar, a journalist arrested in 2010, said that the
intelligence officers who questioned him brandished transcripts of his
phone conversations, and of email and SMS exchanges. These claims
appear to be legitimate. Fellow inmates told Pourheydar that they
had similar experiences (Elgin, Silver and Katz, 2011), while the activist Saleh
Hamid, a university student in 2010, reported that recorded phone
conversations were used against him in interrogations (Secklow, 2012).

Internet Cafes - A Home Away from Home?

Previously, many users attempted to protect their privacy by using
internet cafes, thereby preventing the government from tracing their
online activity back to their home address. The lack of regulation around
internet cafes provoked the government into engaging in frequent
crackdowns on cafes that played host to 'illicit' online activities, with 24
cafes raided and shut down in a single day in January 2007 (Reuters, 2007).
However, such raids were ineffective as a means of deterring individuals
from using internet cafes for unlawful activity, and so in 2012 the
government reacted, introducing an additional measure of censorship
by imposing stringent new regulations on internet cafes.

Under these new regulations, customers of internet cafes are required
to present photographic ID and agree to being filmed by surveillance
cameras before being permitted to go online. Internet cafe managers
are required to keep these video recordings, full identity records, and
the browsing history of their customers for six months after their visit
(Esfandiari, 2012).

These government measures have made it more difficult for Iranian
citizens to surf the internet safely in public. Authorities have been able
to pinpoint the origin of 'illicit' activities down to a specific computer, at
a specific time, allowing them to quickly identify users.

Reinforcing the Surveillance State

The reactive forms of monitoring and intelligence-gathering that we have discussed are central to Iranian authorities' efforts to continuously enhance the efficiency and reach of the surveillance state. The information gathered through the development of rigorous regulatory systems for internet cafes and ISPs, and the weakening of user security through the targeting of SSL-enabled servers, directly inform and expand the body of preventative methods used by the authorities to inhibit internet access.

Connection Throttling

Connection throttling is another method of reactive censorship deployed by authorities to restrict access in response to short-term political or social events. During the protests that followed the 2009 presidential elections, connection speeds to webmail services such as Gmail were significantly hindered. This process has been repeated numerous times since, to the point where internet connection speeds have become a measure for the political situation of Iran. On the eve of significant dates that could give rise to demonstrations, the connection speed is slowed down to prevent the circulation of photos and videos.

> *The reduction of the internet speed, which some called 'disturbances', was the result of security measures taken to preserve calm in the country during the election period.*
> Former ICT Minister Mohammad Hassan Nami, (Esfandiari, 2013)

The state is very forthright about this. Given this unusual openness, it seems such efforts to choke off users' internet access during periods of political tension will continue to form a central component of the state's 'emergency response procedures' in the future.

Hide and Seek: Circumvention Tools in Iran

As we've discussed already, Iranian users are being forced into constant technological innovation in order to outsmart and outmaneuver the state censors. Although a considerable volume of online content is blocked or filtered by the Iranian authorities, users utilise a variety of sophisticated circumvention tools to bypass these restrictions and access blocked websites.

Ducking and Diving

Circumvention tools are fairly ubiquitous, meaning that blocked websites like Facebook and Twitter remain hugely popular in Iran. A September 19 report by Iran's Ministry of Youth and Sports found that 69.3% of Iranian youth are users of circumvention technologies such as proxies or VPNs (ISNA, 2014), demonstrating the extent to which circumvention tools are posing a challenge to Iran's system of internet filtering. The state has attempted to respond. According to the 2009 Cyber Crime Law, it is illegal to distribute any kind of circumvention tool allowing users to bypass the filtering system, or to instruct people how to use such tools (Kelly, Cook and Truong, 2012).

It remains unclear whether the sale and use of VPNs is legal under Iranian law. The ambiguity arises from the fact that VPNs are not technically circumvention tools; their primary purpose is to assist private companies in securing their online communications networks. However, tech-savvy Iranians have increasingly made use of VPNs to bypass sophisticated government internet filtering, using them to connect to proxy servers.

Divided

This situation has prompted some conflicting statements about VPNs from Iranian authorities. In October 2011, Reza Taghipour, a member of the SCC and the former ICT Minister in Ahmadinejad's government, declared the use of VPNs illegal, prompting the Telecommunication Company of Iran (TCI) to impose restrictions on their sale. Yet the MP (and long-time Ahmadinejad critic) Ali Motahari protested that the use of VPNs is indeed permissible under Iranian law, arguing that neither Taghipour's statement nor the action of the TCI had any legal grounding. Recently, however, there have been signs that authorities are attempting to clarify the legal position of VPNs. In May 2014, Kamal Hadianfar, head of Iran's Cyber Police (FATA) announced that Iran's Parliament is currently reviewing the legal status of VPNs, stating that moves will likely be taken to prohibit their usage and sale pending the passage of new legislation (Khabar Online, 2014a).

Although the sale of VPNs has not been explicitly outlawed, this hasn't stopped FATA from making a number of arrests relating to the sale of the tools.

- *10 April 2013*: A young man who sold VPNs and other circumvention tools was arrested by FATA in Qazvin Province (Mashregh News, 2013).

- *5 July 2013*: A 35-year-old man who used another person's identity to sell VPNs was arrested by FATA in Tehran Province (ISNA, 2013).

- *12 March 2014*: An individual who sold VPNs and provided support to users for more than 3 years was arrested by FATA in Razavi Province (Fars News, 2014b).

- *13 April 2014*: A blogger who sold VPNs and other circumvention tools was arrested by FATA in Kerman Province (Tasnim News, 2014b).

At the same time as it has been working to crack down on VPN sellers, the Iranian government has attempted to enter the VPN market in an bid to curtail the usage of VPN technology to evade censorship. The most high-profile effort was launched in March 2013, when the Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC) attempted to outlaw the sale of 'unrecognised' VPNs, instead promoting the sale of an 'official' TIC-developed alternative (Small Media, 2013c).

Just 26 VPN companies applied to register with the state-sanctioned (and state-monitored) TIC VPN, and the trade in unregistered VPNs carried on much as it did before the scheme was introduced. By June, the TIC conceded that the project had failed, and announced its cessation (Small Media, 2013c). Iran appears to be struggling to determine a coherent policy to respond to the challenge posed by the popularity of VPNs and circumvention tools. Though it has attempted punitive crackdowns on sellers, as well as market regulation and co-optation, its efforts have so far failed to dissuade Iranians from using the tools to sidestep the country's filtering system.

So What Does the Future Hold?

With the 2013 election of the moderate President Hassan Rouhani, hopes were raised that Iran would see an easing of the pervasive censorship system and an accompanying opening of the internet. Rouhani had indicated on a number of occasions that this was his intention, publicly stating that he believes in the rights of all Iranians to access information freely, and insisting that his government's

efforts are geared towards this end (NBC News, 2013). Rouhani has also commented on the futility of trying to limit the open nature of the internet.

> *We are living in a world in which limiting information is impossible.*
> *Youth are faced with a bombardment of information and we must*
> *prepare to handle it.*
> Hassan Rouhani during the 2013 presidential campaign (CITNA, 2013)

But a year and a half into Rouhani's presidency, we are yet to see the fulfilment of these promises. Access to Western-produced social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter remains restricted, and the availability of a number of mobile communications apps such as WeChat has been curtailed.

Despite high hopes following the 2013 election, the extent of censorship in Iran shows no signs of diminishing. So what does the future hold? The answer to this question largely depends upon the future of two major government projects: 'Intelligent Filtering' and the 'National Information Network' - also known as SHOMA.

Intelligent Filtering

On 24 January 2014, SCC member Mehdi Akhavan Behabadi made a statement in which he argued that the grievances expressed by users about Iran's filtering processes are largely born from the clumsiness of the country's methods. He believes that Iranians are not campaigning for access to 'immoral' content, but instead for a smarter system, and has indicated that a new form of 'intelligent filtering' technology is being developed to enable authorities to block specific items of content on websites, rather than entire domains, as is currently the case (Mehr News, 2014). These plans were later confirmed by the SCC secretary, Mohammad Hassan Entezari.

> *Some universities and private companies have been working to design*
> *an intelligent filtering system for the Internet that will be able to block*
> *specific parts of websites based on their content. In the near future…*
> *the Iranian people will begin to see less intrusive censorship methods*
> *being implemented.*
> Mohammad Hassan Entezari, SCC Secretary, 29 January 2014 (Khabar Online, 2014b)

The National Information Network - SHOMA

For the past decade the government has spoken intermittently about creating an independent, country-wide network that will host important domestic online services. This network is intended to be fully monitored and censored, hosting only 'clean' content that is 'compatible with religious and revolutionary values.'

SHOMA project is being conducted in four primary phases:

1. The construction of a network capable of separating local and international traffic. SHOMA will be an independent high-speed network that connects all government organisations.

2. The hosting and registration of Iranian websites on local servers and .ir domains respectively.

3. The provision of domestically developed applications and services including an OS, email service, search engine, and communication apps.

4. The production and promotion of online content
    (Small Media, 2014a: 7)

There is a growing fear amongst Iranian internet users that SHOMA is being constructed as a replacement for the global internet and that once the network is completed, and state authorities no longer rely on the global internet to provide them with essential services, they will cut off access to the World Wide Web (Seifi and Knight, 2012).

These fears were compounded by statements made by the Ahmadinejad-era Head of Economic Affairs, Ali Agha-Mohammadi. Although he acknowledged that the new network would initially operate parallel to the internet, he went on to speculate that SHOMA could end up replacing the global internet in Iran, as well as in other Muslim countries (Roads and Fassihi, 2011).

Yet this earlier statement contradicts more recent messages being disseminated by the Iranian government. A majority of officials have assured the public that they have no plans to shut down internet access, claiming instead that SHOMA and the internet will exist as two separate networks, with the former providing high-speed access to

local content and services, and the internet continuing to offer Iranian citizens global connectivity (ITIran, 2012).

The Information Technology Organisation (ITO) has claimed that SHOMA will improve rather than worsen Iranians' browsing experience, as it will enable users to browse local and governmental websites at speeds far higher than they are used to. In this way, it is being framed as a high-speed corridor to access the sites deemed most important (and least controversial) by the government (Tajdin, 2013).

> *Despite what others think, [SHOMA] is not primarily aimed at curbing the global internet but Iran is creating it to secure its own military, banking and sensitive data from the outside world. Iran has fears of an outside cyber-attack like that of Stuxnet [the computer worm developed to attack Iran's nuclear infrastructure], and is trying to protect its sensitive data from being accessible on the world wide web.*
>
> An Iranian IT expert speaking anonymously with The Guardian (Kamali Dehghan, 2012)

Some websites can be accessed on both networks. In these situations the Iranian authorities are encouraging netizens to use SHOMA, as they can more easily monitor its use. In order to attract users to SHOMA the government intends to further decrease the appeal of the global internet. Reporters Without Borders has claimed that the government plans to further throttle connection speeds to the global internet and to increase subscription costs in the hope that subscribing to the faster SHOMA network will become a more attractive prospect (Reporters Without Borders, 2013: 25).

Furthermore, it is also speculated that the authorities have blocked Google and Gmail in an attempt to promote the similar services offered by SHOMA (Reporters Without Borders, 2012b). This process of blocking globally-used websites and applications, and then replicating them domestically is now a frequent occurrence in Iran.

INTERNET

NEWS WEBSITES

INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS SITES

SHOMA

GOVERNMENT MINISTRY WEBSITES

'OFFICIAL' CHAT, EMAIL SERVICES

IRAN-BASED FINANCIAL SERVICES

GOVERNMENT (HEALTHCARE, TAXATION, WELFARE)

IRANIAN SOCIAL NETWORKS

1

USER

IRAN-BASED BUSINESSES

2

UNIVERSITY NETWORKS

ALL OTHER GLOBAL WEB CONTENT

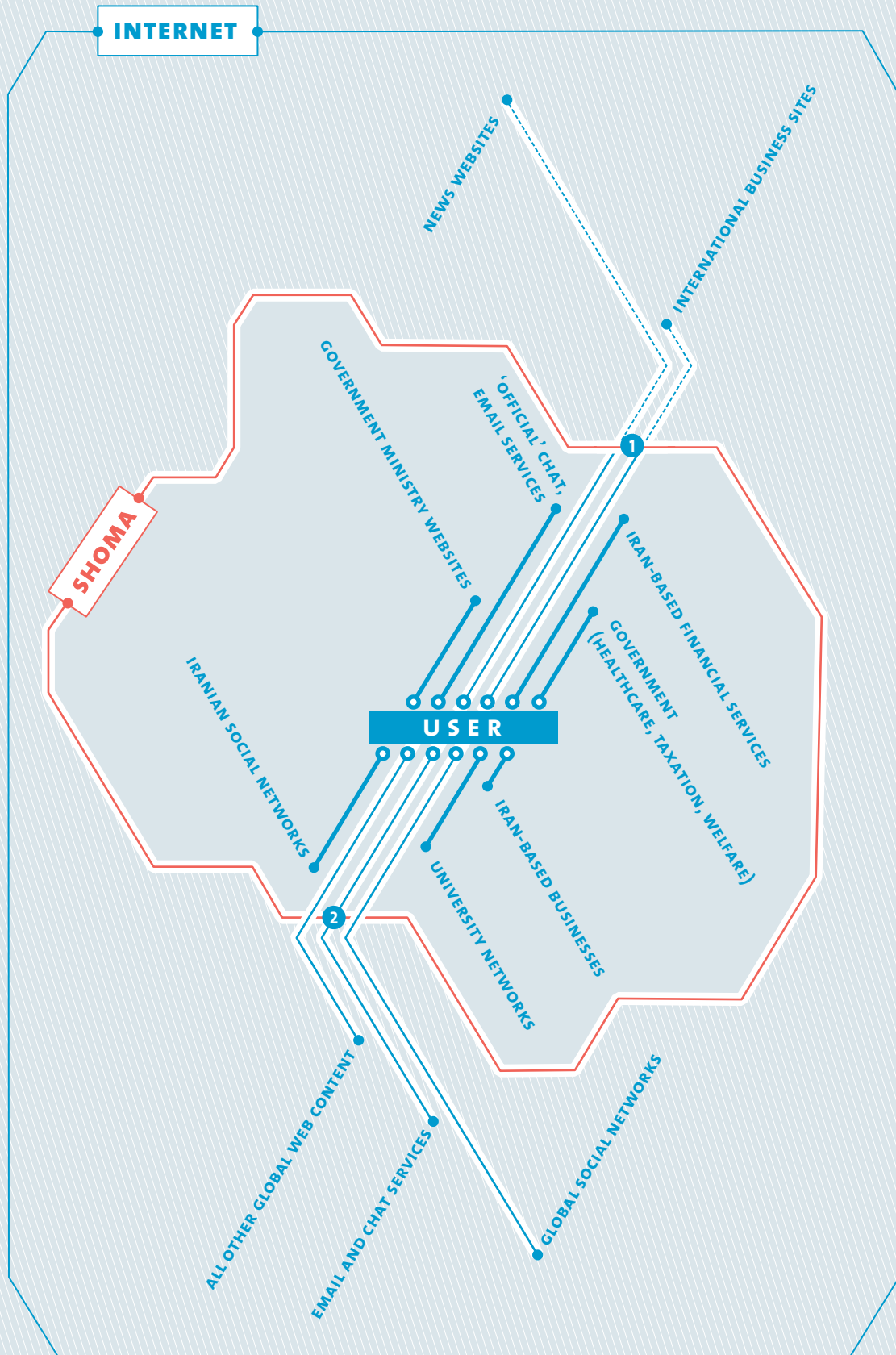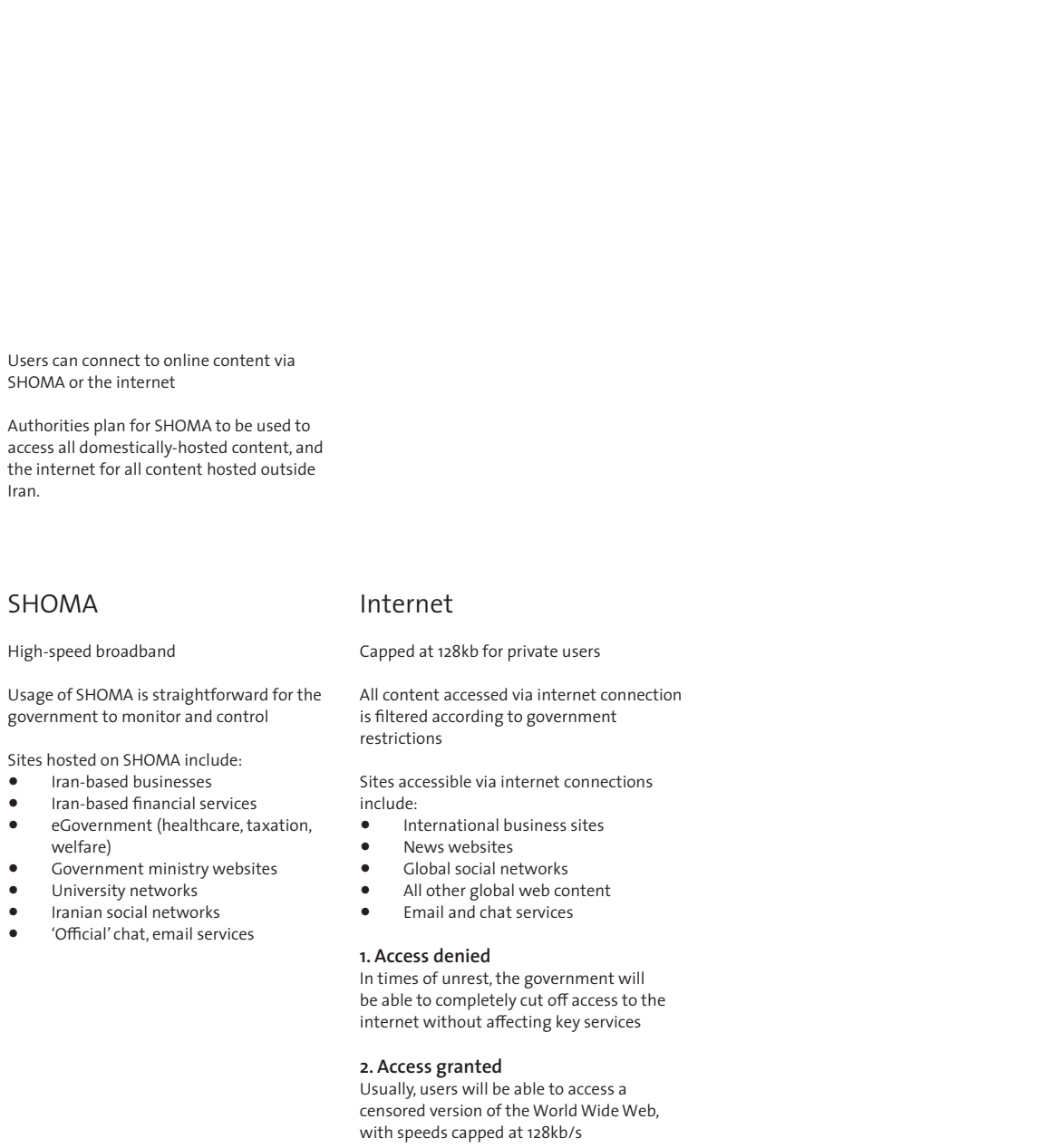EMAIL AND CHAT SERVICES

GLOBAL SOCIAL NETWORKS

figure 4: **SHOMA OVERVIEW**

Users can connect to online content via SHOMA or the internet

Authorities plan for SHOMA to be used to access all domestically-hosted content, and the internet for all content hosted outside Iran.

SHOMA

High-speed broadband

Usage of SHOMA is straightforward for the government to monitor and control

Sites hosted on SHOMA include:
- Iran-based businesses
- Iran-based financial services
- eGovernment (healthcare, taxation, welfare)
- Government ministry websites
- University networks
- Iranian social networks
- 'Official' chat, email services

Internet

Capped at 128kb for private users

All content accessed via internet connection is filtered according to government restrictions

Sites accessible via internet connections include:
- International business sites
- News websites
- Global social networks
- All other global web content
- Email and chat services

1. Access denied
In times of unrest, the government will be able to completely cut off access to the internet without affecting key services

2. Access granted
Usually, users will be able to access a censored version of the World Wide Web, with speeds capped at 128kb/s

The table below shows just how frequently this is taking place. All major blocked services and social networks have seen at least one Iranian analogue produced, as have a number of services that are still freely accessible (Small Media, 2014b).

Non-Iranian Service	Iranian Service
Facebook (blocked)	Cloob // Facenama
YouTube (blocked)	Aparat
WeChat (blocked)	Dialog
Google Analytics (blocked)	Webgozar
Instagram (partially blocked)	Lenzor
Google Play (partially blocked)	Cafe Bazaar
iTunes Store (previously blocked)	BeepTunes
Firefox (unblocked)	Saina
Google (unblocked)	Parsijoo
App Store (unblocked)	Sibche

Such efforts to develop the range of content and services offered on SHOMA are largely aimed at enticing users onto the new network. Whereas Facebook, Youtube and WeChat are only accessible via VPNs, and therefore function at a snail's pace, the state is now offering a bounty of comparable tools, each of which users can access at high speeds and through legitimate channels - all they need to sacrifice is their privacy.

Ultimately, SHOMA may not threaten the long-term accessibility of the global internet in Iran, but huge concerns remain that it will enable the government to more 'cleanly' throttle internet access during periods of political or social unrest, without crippling crucial SHOMA-based infrastructure and services such as banks, airports, and universities. Although its eventual development may result in lessened frustrations for a large number of Iranian users looking to make use of local and government online services, its emergence will equip the Iranian government with a powerful new tool for smothering political dissent online.

Closing the Net

The Iranian government has demonstrably earned its title as an 'enemy of the internet'. It has not only worked to arbitrarily censor content that it deems troublesome, but it has made a concerted effort to erode the online security and privacy of its citizens in order to expand its surveillance capabilities.

Nor do these efforts appear to be lessening under the stewardship of the moderate Rouhani administration. Although he and his ministers have made a number of relatively progressive statements relating to internet freedom, hardline elements retain control over many aspects of internet policy making and enforcement. The most effective intervention that Rouhani has made so far in the realm of internet policy has been to act as a roadblock to the ambitions of more conservative elements by vetoing plans to block WhatsApp.

At the same time, efforts to further expand Iran's capabilities for filtering and controlling internet traffic are continuing apace. The 'intelligent filtering' system promises to engage in a far more streamlined and comprehensive form of content filtering than exists at the present time, whereas SHOMA has the potential to fundamentally redefine the relationship between Iran and the World Wide Web, granting the state expanded surveillance capabilities and allowing it to essentially choke off the country's connection to the World Wide Web in times of crisis.

Though Iranian users have become adept at technological innovation and adaptation in order to stay one step ahead of the state censors, the censorship establishment has also demonstrated a continuing determination to assert their authority over the digital sphere. Given the apparent inability (or unwillingness) of the Rouhani administration to make real concessions in the name of internet freedom, there is little reason to doubt that this national game of cat-and-mouse will continue for a very long time. ◊

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3. THE REVOLUTION WILL BE TELEVISED: STATE AND SATELLITE TV IN IRAN

by James Marchant

Incapable of keeping satellite TV out of Iran, Iranian authorities and state TV executives are now borrowing from global entertainment formats, and injecting them with 'Islamic values'.

Iran's state broadcaster, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), is in trouble. Over the past decade an unending torrent of satellite TV content has poured in from the diaspora, threatening IRIB's media monopoly. In order to maintain its dominance in the media landscape and challenge the "domineering empire of Western media" *(IRIB English, 2010)*, the corporation has been forced to invest massive sums of time and money, and dramatically change the way it makes TV.

This chapter describes the origins of TV and media policy in Iran, while highlighting the centrality of revolutionary ideology to IRIB's activities. It will also engage with case studies to show how IRIB has been radically innovating to maintain cultural relevance. Finally, this chapter looks to the question of women's participation in IRIB, and assesses the impact of reforms upon women in television.

A Battlefield As Wide As The World: Ideology and Media Policy in the Islamic Republic

Cultural Khomeinism and the Revolutionary Potential of the Couch Potato

During the formative years of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini heralded the positive cultural role of the media and chastised the old media establishment for broadcasting television content that "[promoted and preserved] the dominant order… [and] guaranteed the dominance of corrupt powers" (in Guivian, 2006: 79).

Harnessing his newfound power, Khomeini completely overhauled Iran's state media to ensure conformity with the new religious cultural values of the Islamic Republic. His remedy for 'Westoxification'[1] was to turn the Pahlavi-era's cultural orthodoxies on their head, boldly declaring, 'We want our radio and television that have served Satan, to serve God'(Ibid: 76), and proposing that television be conceived of as a 'public university' in which Iranians could be educated in the 'purification' of their culture (Ibid: 79).

The changes were sweeping. IRIB oversaw a dramatic expansion of religious content and documentary programming in its early years,[2] signalling a dramatic shift away from the light entertainment shows that had been imported by the Pahlavi regime and aired on National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT), the pre-revolutionary state broadcaster.

Despite being banned as 'vulgar' by the new Islamic government, these pre-revolutionary entertainment shows retained their popularity amongst many sections of Iranian society (Shahabi, 2008: 115). Old films and entertainment shows were whisked from the archives and out into the diaspora, where they were duplicated, smuggled back into Iran, and aired at underground 'video clubs' (Ibid: 115).

With the advent of new technologies such as satellite television and the internet, which began to permeate Iran in the 1990s, this appetite for the forbidden soon started to pose immense problems for state authorities, and especially for IRIB.

[1]

'Westoxification' was the term coined by the Iranian intellectual Al-e Ahmad in 1962 to describe the phenomenon of 'cultural invasion' from the West. For more, see Chapter 1.

[2]

Just months after the fall of the Shah, religious programming on Channel 1 had jumped from 0.6% of television content to 11.5%. For more information on the early development of IRIB, see Guivian (2006: 90-111).

A Changing Landscape - The Growth of Satellite TV in Iran

Television, be it state-run or satellite, is the single most important transmitter of culture and information in Iran today. A 2012 poll showed that 96% of respondents consider it to be amongst their three most important information outlets (Wojciesak, Smith and Enayat, 2012: 11). Though surveys struggle to pin down reliable estimates for the percentage of Iranians who have access to satellite television—owing in large part to participants' nervousness around its legally-dubious status—Iranian state estimates put the figure somewhere between 45-60% in 2011 (Ibid: 14), suggesting that IRIB's media monopoly now lies in tatters.

The explosion in satellite television began in the early 1990s. By 1995, around half a million satellite dishes were estimated to have been set up in Tehran alone (Barraclough, 2001: 30). The state's battle to control satellite television is one of the most definitive struggles in the cultural politics of post-Khomeini Iran, so it should come as little surprise that IRIB has been the recipient of a great deal of state funding and innovative policy initiatives in recent years.

A Global War – Television During the Rafsanjani Years

Ayatollah Khomeini, the Islamic Republic of Iran's spiritual, moral and intellectual leader, died in 1989. At the time of his death it did not seem that the cultural orthodoxies established by his 'First Republic' would encounter any existential danger. Khomeini's transformation of IRIB into a 'public university' had been ruthless and comprehensive: entertainment content had been slashed to 3.7% of total programming by 1990, while Qur'anic readings and calls to prayer had risen to 4.9% (Abutaleb-Joula, 2007: 86).[3]

By 1991, 85.3% of Iranian television programming was produced inside the country (Ibid: 84-5); programming produced in the US had almost completely disappeared from Iran's broadcast schedule (Kamalipour and Mowlana, 1994: 86). These statistics indicate that the state's management of IRIB did not change in any significant way after Khomeini's death. The figures are in line with his promises to Islamicise national culture, and to "spread the divine ethos in society" (in Guivian, 2006: 82).

The emergence of new communications technologies such as satellite television provided the impetus for change, and pushed Khamenei's Second Republic[4] into a more defensive stance. Since 1989, Iran has

[3]
The largest proportion of content was made up of youth television (16.4%), social and cultural programming (14.9%) and news programming (14.4%). For more information, see (Abutaleb-Joula, 2007: 86)

[4]
Ali Khamenei was selected as Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini's successor in 1989. Serving as President from 1981-9, Khamenei was a staunch ally of the former Leader.

worked to reframe cultural discourses around the idea of 'cultural invasion' by the 'satanic' West. To this end, it has cast diaspora television producers as Western 'collaborators', in order to delegitimise their secular constructions of Iranian cultural identity (Ibid: 84).

Khamenei has taken a leading role in driving assertion that Islamic television should respond to the growing popularity of Western satellite TV broadcasts, personally writing a number of newspaper editorials on the topic. In them, he describes a civilisational war in which 'Islamic values' must be protected from Western influences so that the 'totality' of Western egoist culture might be overcome and vanquished (Boroujerdi, 1996: 161).

> [Islamic television should] never forget the ugliness of the enemies of God and the people [or] capitulate to the enemy's propaganda.
> Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Jomhouri-ye Islami, 1989
> (in Guivian, 2006: 86)

This reactionary language found voice in the 1995 ban on the use of satellite dishes, which was met by derision from the more liberal politicians. The difficulty of controlling such a medium was highlighted in the debates preceding the parliamentary vote on the ban, in which one MP reportedly dismissed the initiative on the basis of its absolute impracticality, stating that a ban on satellite dishes would be impossible to enforce "even if we bring in our entire army" (in Barraclough, 2001: 32). Nevertheless, ideological considerations trumped practical ones, and the ban was enacted with a large parliamentary majority.

Unlikely Reformers - Larijani and the Restructuring of IRIB

As early as 1995, some reformist voices were calling for a restructuring and reorientation of IRIB that would make it more popular with consumers. An article in the newspaper Salam pinned the blame for the popularity of satellite TV on broadcasting authorities who were 'not familiar with existing tastes and interests in society' (Ibid). In their view, IRIB was stale and culturally irrelevant.

In 1994 Mohammad Hashemi, the moderate head of IRIB, was replaced by the arch-conservative Ali Larijani. Despite his reputation, Larijani oversaw a number of dramatic organisational reforms. The number of channels doubled, and each channel was granted its own unique identity.[5]

5
Channel 3 became dominated by youth-focused television, whereas Channel 4 hosted the majority of IRIB's dense theological programming.

Revolution Decoded
3. The revolution will be televised:
state and satellite TV in Iran
47

Entertainment shows also started 'borrowing' from existing diasporic formats in order to attract wider audiences. Barraclough cites IRIB game show Mashq-e Bozorg ('The Big Exercise'), in which couples compete for prizes, as one such example (Ibid: 39). Larijani's reforms thereby demonstrated Iran's recognition of the need to satisfy the public's cultural demands, and its willingness to replicate popular diasporic productions to this end.

In this way, the early years of the Second Republic were characterised by unevenness of policy and early examples of adaptation and syncretism in which IRIB attempted to match the influx of Western popular culture with 'sanitised' alternatives.

A Blind Eye - Satellite TV and State Responses under Khatami and Ahmadinejad

The surprise election of the avowedly reformist and socially liberal Mohammad Khatami as President in 1997 brought hope to Iran's youth for increased engagement with the West and for an end to cultural authoritarianism on the part of the state (Axworthy, 2008: 282). Yet his presidency, lasting from 1997-2005, was marked by a pervading sense of powerlessness in the face of Supreme Leader Khamenei's authority.

Despite having the backing of a reformist parliament, Khatami was unable to change the trajectory of Iranian broadcasting policy. Each time Khatami attempted to legitimise cultural heterogeneity in the Iranian media, the conservative authorities moved to reassert their hegemony and forbid cultural exchange with the West.[6]

6

In 2003 the ultraconservative Guardian Council blocked parliamentary legislation that would have legalised private satellite receivers.

Nonetheless, Khatami's government turned a blind eye to the issue of satellite receivers, allowing diaspora broadcasters to undergo a boom. By the time Ahmadinejad came into office, 37 Persian-language satellite channels were broadcasting to Iran from the US, Europe, and the Gulf States. As early as 2003, academics estimated that around 24 million young Iranians had access to cultural imports from the West as a result of both satellite TV and Internet access (Piri and Ab Halim, 2011: 90).

Ahmadinejad's administration, far more dedicated to upholding Khamenei's cultural orthodoxies, did what it could to reverse this explosion in satellite ownership, intensifying the satellite ban in 2006, giving the basij militia free rein to attack and confiscate receivers,

and increasing IRIB funding.[7] The state also began to deploy satellite-jamming technology to disrupt broadcasts (see Figure 1), with BBC Persian, VoA, Radio Zamaneh and Rangarang all affected (Small Media, 2012: 36-41). Such censorship methods have been intermittently replicated by security forces under President Rouhani (Amoei, 2013).

In the past few years state broadcasters have been active in their attempts not only to shut Iran off from diasporic television productions, but to re-enact popular diasporic formats within the framework of state religious ideology. In doing so, Iranian authorities and IRIB executives have undertaken a dramatic strategic shift. Incapable of keeping diasporic media out of Iran, IRIB is now actively competing within the media market it sought to smother.

Imitation is the Sincerest Form of Flattery: Mimicry in Contemporary Iranian Television

In the following case studies we illustrate how IRIB and other state-licensed programming has become dependent upon diasporic formats, taking on many attributes of globalised culture while attempting to resist the secularising influences of diasporic 'Westoxification'. The popularity of diaspora-produced programming inspired IRIB-backed derivatives as early as the mid-1990s, but the growing number of satellite stations and expansion of high-quality original programming has led Iran-based producers to step up their campaign of cultural reproduction in recent years.

TV Dinners - Befarmaeed Sham and Sham Irani

One of the clearest examples of diasporic influence upon domestic Iranian programming is illustrated by comparing the relationship between Manoto1's Befarmaeed Sham and the Iran-based production company Shabake Namayesh Khanegi's[8] Sham Irani. Befarmaeed Sham rose to prominence in 2010, when it was launched on the London-based satellite channel Manoto1.

Itself a replica of the global 'Come Dine With Me' format in which contestants take it in turns to host dinner parties, Befarmaeed Sham proved to be a great hit in Iran, beamed into millions of homes via satellite and episodes uploaded to the Manoto Youtube channel typically receiving between 50,000-100,000 views each (Manototv, 2009). Filmed in the diaspora, Befarmaeed Sham subverts a number of the

conventions of Iranian domestic television, and presents an image of a secularised Iranian diasporic existence.

Sham Irani, launched in 2011 by the Iran-based production company Shabake Namayesh Khanegi, drew immediate comparisons with the successful Manoto show. Journalist Reza Sadiq commented '[Befarmaeed Sham] heavily absorbed the domestic viewership. Now an Iranian version will be made and Iranised' (Ghafoori-Azar, 2011). Sham Irani is exactly this: a programme that apes the structure and format of the popular Western-rooted Befarmaeed Sham whilst making clear efforts to cleanse it of 'alien' cultural elements.

Many of the comparisons are plainly reflective of differences in moral values and cultural norms between diasporic and domestic programming. Alcohol consumption is one striking difference. Whereas Sham Irani remains completely 'dry' (reflecting the IRI's ban on alcohol consumption), Befarmaeed Sham's contestants frequently consume wine or other alcoholic beverages, with cocktails and filled-to-the-brim wine glasses even making a front-of-stage appearance in the animated introductory sequence (Manototv, 2012: 0:31-0:46).

Although it might be tempting to ascribe alcohol's presence in Befarmaeed Sham to the diaspora's cultural distance from Iranian society, Sham Irani is less representative of regular life in Iran. Alcohol consumption is fairly widespread in Iran, with 39.9% of high-school-aged students reporting at least some level of alcohol consumption (Najafi, Zarrabi, Shirazi, Fekri and Mohseni, 2009: 21). Diaspora space is being used as a way of representing everyday Iranian life in a way that the prohibitive cultural norms of domestic media preclude, thereby establishing a level of authenticity and legitimacy in the eyes of its audience.
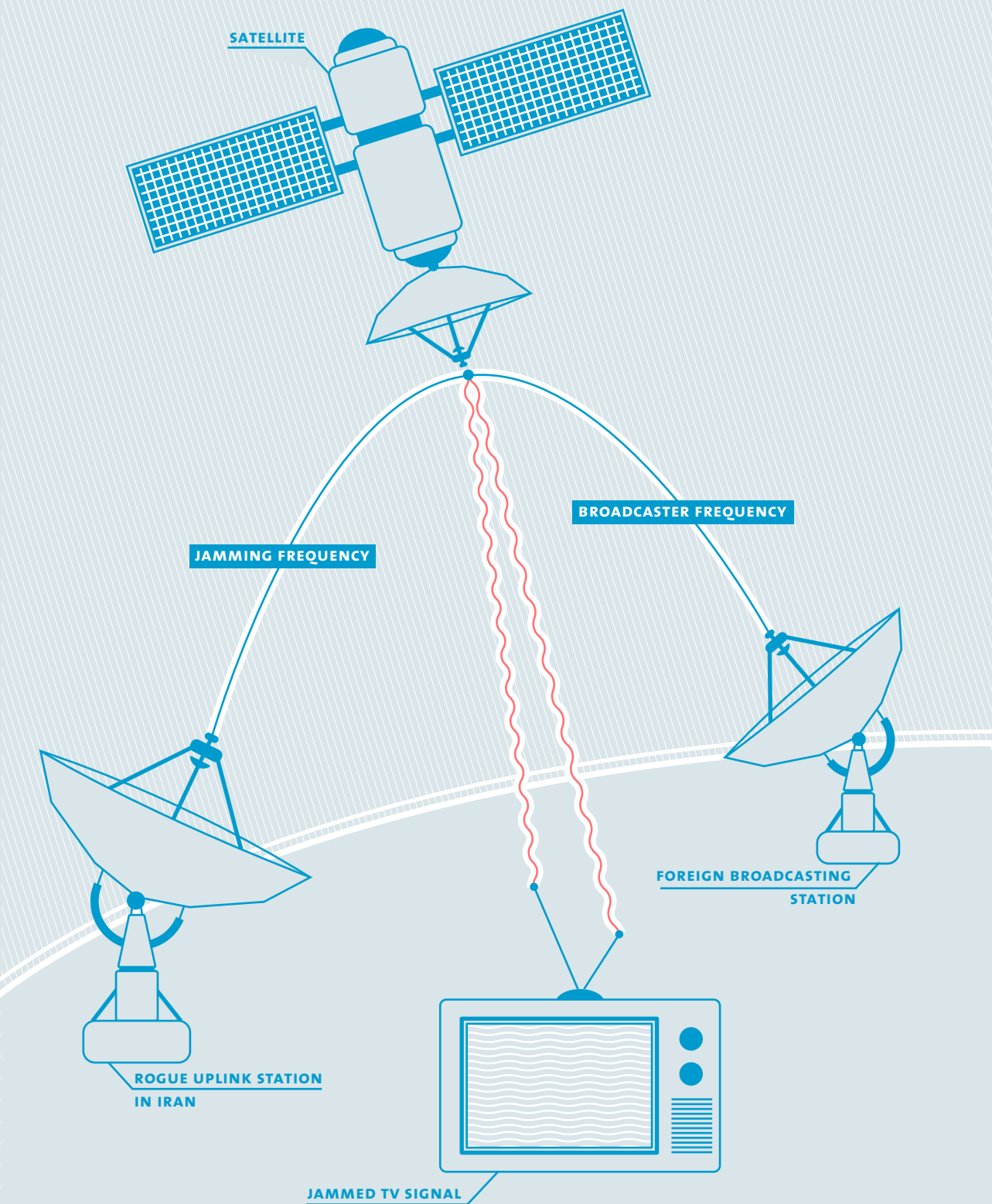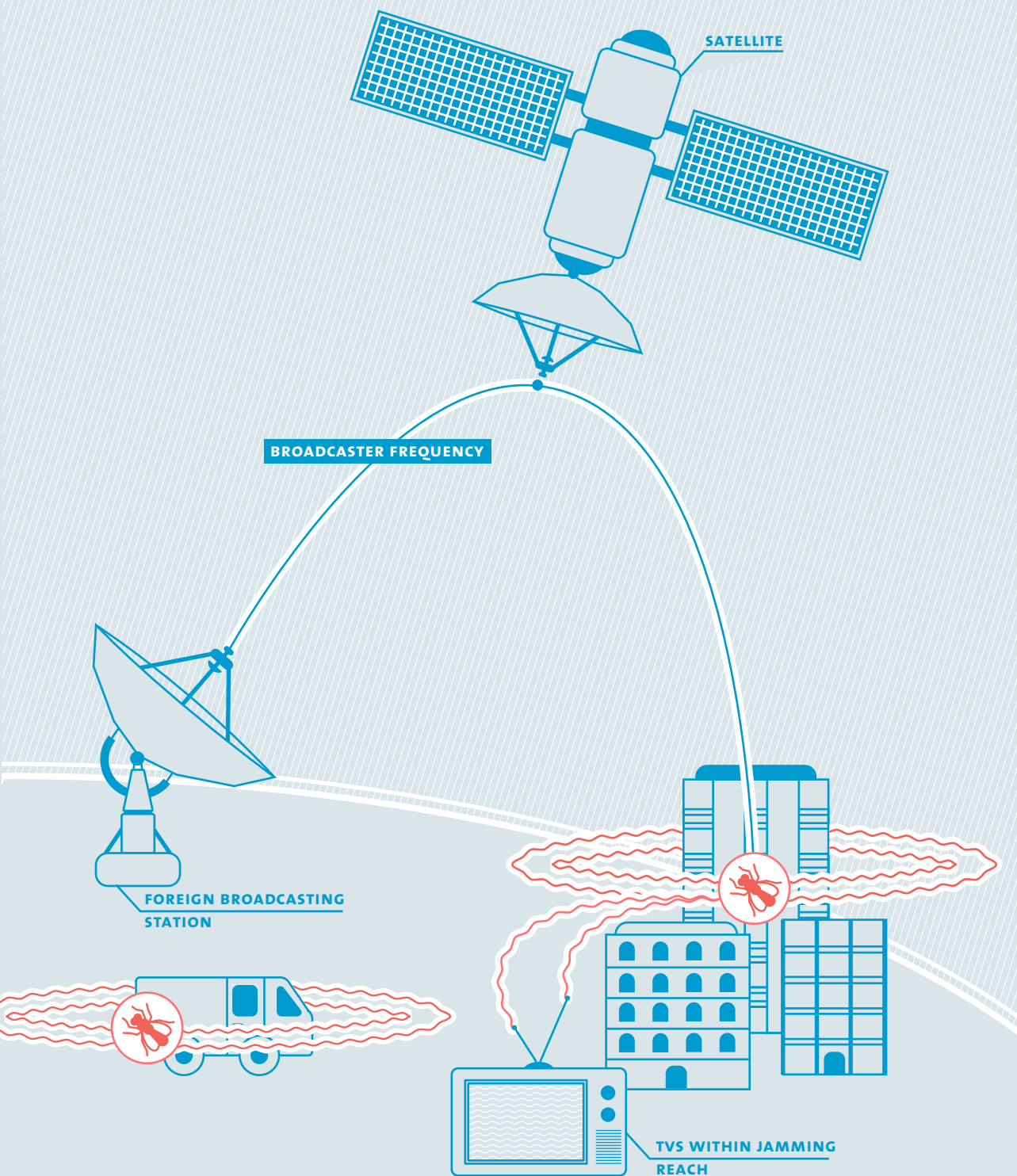
SATELLITE

BROADCASTER FREQUENCY

JAMMING FREQUENCY

FOREIGN BROADCASTING STATION

ROGUE UPLINK STATION IN IRAN

JAMMED TV SIGNAL

figure 1: **SATELLITE JAMMING IN IRAN**

SATELLITE

BROADCASTER FREQUENCY

FOREIGN BROADCASTING
STATION

TVS WITHIN JAMMING
REACH

In Persian, the word for jamming is 'Parazit', which is also the word for parasite. Portable terrestrial jammers have a range of 3-5 kilometres in urban areas and can be concealed on buildings or mobilised on vehicles.

Befarmaeed Sham Opening Sequence (Manototv, 2012: 0:44)

The representation of women in Sham Irani is in line with state-defined notions of modesty and Islamic dress codes. Episodes are based around single-sex groups, with female-led episodes featuring women wearing 'good hijab' (wrapped tightly, with no hair showing) and interacting with each other in a relentlessly pleasant and polite manner. In contrast, Befarmaeed Sham nullifies gender difference, with numerous episodes featuring mixed-gender groups, and levels of informal physical contact that would be considered taboo by state broadcasters.

A single-gender group sit and enjoy their meal on Sham Irani
(VoODiVideoSerial, 2012)

A

mixed-gender group share a toast on Befarmaeed Sham (Manoto, 2013)

Such taboos are far less entrenched in the real fabric of Iranian society. Shahram Khosravi describes the dual constructions of 'public and private selves' in Iran, where chadors and gender segregation rule on the streets, and a far more permissive atmosphere predominates behind closed doors (Khosravi, 2008: 123).

The artificiality of Sham Irani is an extension of this public orthodoxy of pretence and inauthenticity. Fatemeh Sadeghi notes the symbolic importance of veiling to state-promoted discourses of anti-imperialism and anti-Westoxification, stating that 'veiling is believed to signify the identity of the nation, and of Islamic society, fighting against the West for independence' (Sadeghi, 2008: 219).

The significance of proper veiling within this constructed response to a Westoxified item of 'cultural invasion' like Befarmaeed Sham marks a reassertion of state-perceived cultural values in the face of subversive diasporic presentations of gender. This represents only the public orthodoxy, not the everyday realities of 'bad' or non-existent hijab in the private sphere (Khosravi, 2008: 123).

Diasporic programming such as Befarmaeed Sham, for all the physical distance of diaspora, is better suited to expressing an authentic and recognisable 'private realm' to young Iranian viewers than the domestic alternatives.

Befarmaeed Sham places little importance on the presentation of genteel, mild-mannered dinner discussions, and airs acrimonious

arguments when they occur (Didaniha, 2013). The programme also features
a sarcastic, bitingly comedic voice-over in the tradition of the original
British version of Come Dine With Me. Sham Irani features neither of
these elements, reflecting the prioritisation of traditional values over
entertainment in domestic productions.

The freedom from state censors also enables Befarmaeed Sham to
present discussion topics that could never be broadcast on domestic
television. In one episode, the guests engage in a lengthy discussion
around homosexuality (Manototv, 2011: 39:20). Although the discussion
swiftly spirals into one in which homosexuality is described variously
as a mental illness and as a reaction to heterosexual heartbreak, the
fact that the topic was broached at all is due to the freedom offered by
diasporic broadcasters.

Ramadan Rip-offs - Haft Sang, Modern Family, and the Iranian Holiday Season

In recent years, the Ramadan season has emerged as one of the hottest
times of the year for high-budget, populist TV. Whereas a decade
ago, Ramadan programming was solemnly fixated on fasting and
prayer, the growing popularity of satellite-based Turkish and Arabic-
language Ramadan programming in Iran has triggered a dramatic
re-examination of IRIB's Ramadan broadcasting schedule. As a result
of the broadcaster's growing investment in seasonal television, today's
Ramadan sitcoms and high-quality soap operas are capable of drawing
huge audiences.

One of the most high-profile examples of Ramadan programming
in 2014 has been the IRIB sitcom Haft Sang (Seven Stones), which
follows the lives and fortunes of an extended Iranian family. On first
appearance, the show appears quite progressive both in terms of its
content and its character development.

The show is dominated by a number of assertive and independent
female characters, whilst marriages in the show appear to run counter
to patriarchal conventions seen elsewhere in the Iranian media
environment (although the show remains forbidden from showing
physical contact between male and female characters, even if they are
married on-screen).

The relatively liberal values on display in Haft Sang are not original products of the Iranian media environment. Haft Sang is a duplicate of the popular American sitcom Modern Family. The striking similarities between the two shows have been highlighted on social media, with videos offering side-by-side comparisons of scenes lifted directly from Modern Family and replicated for broadcast on IRIB (Haghighi, 2014).

Leila and Claire burst into their eldest child's room to stop any funny business.
(Haghighi, 2014: 0:17)

Mohsen and Phil stand in the garden, training their (fake) guns on their youngest son.
(Haghighi, 2014: 0:00)

Amir and Haley stand on their balconies, arguing with their father below.
(Haghighi, 2014: 0:53)

Haft Sang	Modern Family
Behrooz and Elham adopt a daughter, owing to Behrooz's infertility.	Cam and Mitchell, a gay couple, adopt a daughter, Lily.
Leila worries about the relationship developing between her son Amir, and his friend Anoush, whom she fears will be a bad influence.	Claire disapproves of her teenage daughter Haley's relationship with her dim-witted boyfriend Dylan, whom she dislikes.
The aging Nasir marries Mehri, a young, surly woman from a working-class family from South Tehran.	Jay, the grandfather of the family, marries Gloria, a young and attractive Colombian woman.

Major changes and adaptations between Modern Family and Haft Sang

Despite the production team's best efforts, the show was met with decidedly mixed reactions from the Iranian media and the wider public. A number of viewers and commentators skewered Haft Sang for its lack of originality, calling it a bland clone that had been poorly adapted for an Iranian audience.

> *Did the American life of Modern Family translate into the Iranian life of Haft Sang? It didn't. This TV series couldn't connect with the majority of people; the makers were so obsessed with the American show that they didn't even change anything when making the Iranian version.*
> Mardom-Salari (2014)

> *You can feel that it is not an Iranian film. Even jokes are not Iranicised to be compatible with our everyday life.*
> Jafar, a 55-year old Iranian viewer (The National, 2014)

The makers defended the program and denied critics' accusations of plagiarism. Haft Sang's director, Alireza Bazrafshan, participated in an interview with Fars News to defend the show.

> *70% to 80% of the show is original and only 10%-15% is adapted like everybody is saying. We took the ideas and installed our own story over the top of it… [only] a small amount is recreated. They can complain as much as they like!*
> Alireza Bazrafshan, (in Alef, 2014)

The controversy rumbled on, eventually reaching the IRIB Supervisory Council, which ruled that the show's producers were not in breach of any laws, stating that adaptations are common in the film and television industries. They added that the show's producers made efforts to inject Islamic and Iranian values into Haft Sang, and concluded that the series was morally consistent with the values of IRIB (Deutsche Welle Persian, 2014).

Haft Sang's development is illustrative of IRIB's current strategy for attracting larger domestic audiences through the emulation of foreign satellite programming. Consequently, it is becoming more difficult to characterise IRIB as a stridently ideological and revolution-minded broadcaster. Although its content remains noticeably more conservative and morally focused than satellite programming, numerous compromises have been made with Western-produced formats and programmes in recent years. This awkward syncretism between 'Islamic' and imported television has failed to impress clerics or enrapture audiences.

Mothers and Daughters: Women in Iranian Television

Owing to the Islamic Republic's religiously inspired moral standards, women in the performing arts faced particular difficulties in the years following the revolution. The requirement for women to wear hijab whilst performing resulted in sluggish or awkward movement from actors and restricted their range of expression both on-stage and on-screen.

The variety of women's roles also contracted dramatically in the post-revolutionary period, with female characters typically written as pious, dutiful, and lacking in complexity (Kar, 2010). Despite these setbacks, women continued to participate in IRIB programming and have been partial beneficiaries of the corporation's efforts to reinvent itself in the eyes of viewers.

Suitable Attire - Dress Codes in IRIB Broadcasting

In the early years of the Islamic Republic, IRIB had only 2 major channels and, owing in part to the ongoing war with Iraq, entertainment output was limited. The majority of IRIB's early serials depicted simple lives, plain furniture, and traditional families in which women tended to be restricted to the roles of housewives, wearing loose clothes and dark colors.

At the same time, prior to the standardisation of practices at IRIB there remained some degree of variance in the representation of women, and in veiling practices across the organisation. Women filming in studio locations endured more restrictions than women shooting in outdoor locations, away from the oversight of IRIB supervisors.

The differences that emerged out of such simple regulatory oversights are stark: whereas the women in the social issue-focused series Aayene (Channel 1, 1985) adhere strictly to Islamic norms of dress, those participating in the popular historical TV series Sarbedaran (Channel 1, 1984) are far from 'revolutionary' in their attire, despite the two shows airing on IRIB's Channel 1 within a year of one another.

Sarbedaran is a particularly interesting case. Although they were forced to wear wigs, the female actors in the series were permitted to show a great deal of 'hair', something that would never pass in today's media environment.

Aayene (1985), Channel 1 - a traditional family, showing women dressed very conservatively
(Iranserial, 2014: 19:29)

Sarbedaran (1984), Channel 1 - a historical drama, depicting women with prominent (albeit false) hair (Beyhaq, 2014)

In the following years, IRIB changed its policies and expanded its oversight of on-location filming. By 1999, women's dress had been brought firmly into line with 'Islamic' regulations. Even the historical drama Kif-e Englisi ('The English Bag', Channel 1, 1999), set in the secular Pahlavi era, was trimmed of any female hair. Women in Kif-e Englisi were forbidden from wearing wigs, and were anachronously forced to cover their heads and wear long collars to obscure their necks.

An example of the 'imaginative' dress adaptations in Kif-e Englisi (1999), Channel 1 (IRIB Archive)

The 'modern' look - colourful and comprehensive coverings in Sakhteman Pezeshkan (2011), Channel 3 (Javani, 2011)

The roles available to women have also expanded in the past decade. Whereas female actors previously had to make do as devoted housewives and mothers, today women can expect to play the roles of students, lawyers, and doctors in IRIB productions. So long as they maintain the conservative aesthetic of Islamic dress, more and more opportunities have been opening up for women to participate in the output of IRIB.

Screen Adaptation - Compliance and Resistance Amongst Female Actors

Female actors have reacted to the constraints imposed by IRIB in various ways, ranging from accommodation and compromise with the new system, to subtle subversion. Hamideh Kheirabadi[9] and her daughter Soraya Ghassemi were popular and hugely prolific pre-revolutionary actors who continued to work in the domestic television industry in spite of the post-1979 restrictions, and the limited range of roles available to them.

In her post-revolutionary career, Kheirabadi most frequently played the part of the compassionate, religious and permanently chador-clad mother. Although her daughter belonged to a younger generation,

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Kheirabadi's on-screen record is very extensive. She is credited as having played roles in around 200 films and 20 major TV series over the course of her career.

Ghassemi followed in her mother's footsteps, for the most part playing morally uncomplicated, maternal characters.

Hamideh Kheirabadi (left) and her daughter Soraya Ghassemi (right), in the pre-revolutionary period (Unknown magazine, pre-1979)

Hamideh Kheirabadi on-screen in the post-revolutionary period, in Ejare Neshinha (1986)
(Shariati, 2014: 3:38)

Fatemeh Motamed-Arya, born in 1961, is a television and cinema actor. She studied acting at the Tehran University of the Arts and began her television career working on children's shows such as Madrese-ye Moosha (Mouse School). In recent years she has engaged in a number of small acts of defiance against the expected moral and social conventions of IRIB, and the state.

Fatemeh Motamed-Arya, on the children's show Madrese-ye Moosha (1981), Channel 1 (Aftab News, 2012)

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Motamed-Arya was one of the most prolific actors on Iranian television, appearing in a number of popular and highly regarded shows. One hugely successful series was Gol-e Pamchal (Primrose), a drama that followed the stories of internally displaced refugees from southern Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, which featured a particularly lax enforcement of Islamic dress codes, having far more female hair on show than would be permitted on IRIB today.

Fatemeh Motamed-Arya in Gol-e Pamchal, Channel 2
(Iranian Series Network, 2013)

Although her hair passed under the radar in Gol-e Pamchal, Motamed-Arya's liberal interpretation of the Islamic dress code has caused her more trouble in recent years. The actress has frequently provoked the ire of state authorities when travelling to foreign film festivals, as she rarely wears her hijab in public. She faced extensive travel restrictions from 2009-10 as a result of her conduct abroad, as well as her open support of the Green Movement (Payvand, 2010).[9]

When Motamed-Arya attended the Cannes Film Festival in 2010, she wore a green wristband as a symbol of affinity with the Green Movement, and appeared without hijab, an act of direct defiance. As a result of this political statement, she was barred from appearing on domestic television and cinema. In 2013, as the Rouhani administration extended control over the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, two of her films were granted permission to air in cinemas. As of 2014, she remains barred from appearing on state television.

The cost remains high for those actors seeking to challenge the cultural orthodoxies promulgated by IRIB. Performers who seek to advance their careers inside Iran are expected to act in accordance with the moral and political views of IRIB, and concomitantly, the state establishment; those who do not comply are blacklisted and forced into the shadows.

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Two years after the controversy that arose as a result of the presidential elections in 2009, Motamed-Arya was called to the notorious Evin Prison and fined for participating in a Green Movement campaign film and for visiting the families of wounded and deceased protesters.

Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Today: A Compromised Vision

The IRIB of today is a confused and contradictory organisation. Founded as a means of fending off Western cultural invasion through the dissemination of nationally produced, religiously infused television programming, it has slowly transformed into that which it has sworn to oppose.

From its very foundation, IRIB has appropriated and refashioned popular diaspora-produced show formats as a means of attracting new audiences. With the staggering growth of satellite television in the past decade, this syncretism has been dramatically intensified in an effort to maintain IRIB's media dominance.

As a consequence, IRIB and other state-recognised content distributors have been pulled in a number of different directions in an effort to uphold conservative Islamic ideological credentials, whilst at the same time attempting to cultivate a reputation for contemporary, modern and youth-focused programming.

Despite IRIB's best efforts, the ubiquity of satellite television in Iranian homes speaks to the organisation's failure to adapt successfully to the current media environment, and to the continuing influence and cultural resonance of foreign-produced television in Iran today. ◊

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4. IDENTITY POLITICS: ONLINE COMMUNITIES IN IRAN

by Kyle Bowen

Online platforms have opened up spaces for marginalised and niche groups to organise. Although the government attempts to filter and control online spaces, it is ultimately unable to control the parameters of online debate.

The Islamic Republic of Iran polices the morality of its citizens according to rigid conservative interpretations of Islamic law. This ideological imperative is entrenched in the Iranian Constitution, leaving many minority communities in Iran excluded from the public sphere.

While the state was rigorously maintaining the dominance of Islamic norms in public spaces, cyberspace emerged as a crucial alternative forum for free cultural, social and political activity. Online spaces have been colonised by a number of nonconformist groups.

This chapter explores how the internet has provided various social, political and religious factions with new spaces for activism and community building. We present three very different case studies to illustrate this point, focusing firstly on Iran's religious minority groups, before moving onto the LGBT community and, lastly, its religious conservative activists.

For Iran's religious minority and LGBT communities, the internet exists as a space of free expression that is unparallelled in Iranian society. The case of religious conservatives provides an interesting point of contrast: the establishment's push to get regime supporters onto the web demonstrates the growing centrality of the internet as a public forum in modern Iran.

Faith In Fiber Optics: Iran's Religious Cyber-Communities

Iran is host to a wide variety of faiths and religious sects. Despite this diversity, Iran's constitution denotes Shi'a Muslim as the country's official religion and only grants formal recognition to Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians. These groups, considered "people of the book," are permitted to "perform their religious rites and ceremonies and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education" (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979).

Despite being constitutionally protected, Iran's recognised minorities face challenges not experienced by the majority Shi'a population, including discrimination in education and employment, a ban on proselytism and, in isolated cases, violent persecution. For Iran's unrecognised minorities, such as the Baha'i, the situation is far worse.

Just as each of Iran's minority religious communities has endured unique challenges, so have their online communities devised unique strategies and solutions to ameliorate the difficult conditions they face.

In the following segment, we take a brief look at a number of faith communities in order to demonstrate how technology has supported the creation of new open spaces for community engagement for these groups.

Enemies of the State: The Baha'i Community

'Gems of Inestimable Value' - The Baha'i Institute of Higher Education

As an unrecognised religious minority, Iran's Baha'i community endures systematic persecution. Considered heretics by Iran's clerical establishment, Baha'is are banned from government employment and their businesses are routinely closed down by the authorities. Moreover Baha'is are categorically excluded from the country's higher education system.[1]

Such exclusionary policies have had an adverse effect upon employment opportunities and socio-economic status. They also constitute a spiritual affront to the Baha'i community, who consider education to be of paramount importance. This oft-quoted line from a Baha'i holy text underscores the immense value this religious community places on learning:

[1] There are numerous articles that discuss the expulsion of Baha'i students. For examples, see: (Human Rights Activists New Agency, 2011), "Baha'i Student Farnod Jahangiri Expelled from Babolsar University"; and (Mohabat News 2012), "Baha'i student expelled from the University of Zahedan"

> *Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can,*
> *alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit*
> *therefrom.*
> Baha'u'llah (Lawh-i Maqsud, 1881: 162)

In 1987, the community set up the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education
(BIHE), an underground distance learning university that was initially
dependent upon a network of couriers connecting students to
volunteer teachers. Worksheets and exams were ferried back and forth
between staff and students in a laborious process which often meant
students had to wait months for feedback on completed assignments.

Face-to-face classes were also conducted in underground classrooms on
a semi-regular basis. They took place either in rented buildings or the
homes of Baha'i community members, though there always remained
the risk of neighbourly tip-offs, raids and arrests. Such raids occurred on
a massive scale in 2011, when the homes of around 30 staff were raided,
and 16 Baha'i educators were arrested.

> *The harassment and restrictions are something that, sadly, the Baha'is*
> *of Iran have gotten used to. In terms of the BIHE, it's a repeat offense.*
> Diane Ala'i, UN Representative of the Baha'i International Community
> (in Small Media, 2012: 31)

This repressive environment has prompted Baha'is to look for solutions
online, with the BIHE making particularly bold moves to embrace
the internet as a tool for distance learning. The integration of Skype-
based lessons into the BIHE toolkit has allowed the organisation to
perform classes in a dispersed and raid-resistant environment and to
attract volunteer faculty from all over the world. The BIHE's Affiliated
Global Faculty—consisting of Baha'i and non-Baha'i volunteers—has
contributed immensely to the organisation's reconstruction effort in the
wake of the 2011 crisis (Ibid: 28).

In addition to facilitating safer and more frequent lessons, the internet
has consigned the BIHE's trusty moped courier to history, with
resources and examinations exchanged instantly via Moodle platforms
(Ibid). Security remains an issue for any online activities conducted by
the BIHE and its students, but the Institute is able to lean on a global
community of volunteers to help maintain the university's online
security in the face of state attacks.

In sum, the BIHE has become a safer and more efficient institution since it incorporated online platforms into its teaching methods. Harnessing the power of the internet has enabled the BIHE to transform itself into a deep-rooted, resilient, and globally focused institution, which is benefitting from the talents and engagement of Baha'is the world over.

Conversion Denied: The Evangelical Christian Community

Unlike the Baha'i faith, Christianity is a religion formally recognised by Iran's constitution. Iranian Christians are theoretically entitled to practice their faith and live according to its precepts. In practice, Iran's Christians face myriad challenges ranging from state surveillance to raids on their places of worship (Ibid: 56). This section details these challenges and shows how Iranian Christians are increasingly turning to online spaces for solutions.

Instruments of God - Satellite TV and Christian Evangelism in Contemporary Iran

For many evangelical Christians, sharing the 'Good News' is an important duty of their faith. The Islamic Republic's laws against proselytism make it nearly impossible for evangelicals to practice their faith publicly. The fact that Iranian evangelical churches are often linked with churches in the West further fuels the paranoia of the Iranian authorities.

In the absence of open forums in which they can express their faith in Iran, evangelical Christians have organised themselves extensively online and built far-reaching networks with evangelical groups around the world. Illustrative of this trend is the work of the organisation Iran Alive Ministries, a US-based evangelical group that manages the Persian-language evangelical satellite channel Network SeVen, which has the stated goal of 'transform[ing] Iran into a Christian nation within this generation' (Iran Alive Ministries, 2014).

Network SeVen's evangelism campaign is spearheaded by the diaspora-based Pastor Hormoz Shariat, who presents a number of the religious programmes and services delivered to Iran via satellite broadcasts. These broadcasts are theoretically capable of reaching millions of Iranian citizens. Iran Alive Ministries also manages a number of online chatrooms in which interested Iranians may speak with volunteers from around the world, ask questions about Christianity, and on

occasions convert to the faith. Similar opportunities are available via the church's dedicated call-in service (Small Media, 2014a: 63).

This diverse evangelism toolkit offers Christians a means to proselytise inside Iran, and demonstrates the crucial international support that the community receives through online platforms. The strength of these networks has played a major role in enabling persecuted evangelical communities in Iran to persist and grow.

Services Will Resume Shortly - Online Church Attendance in Iran

Foreign evangelical organisations are not solely geared towards fostering rapid growth in Iran; they have also invested in substantial levels of technological infrastructure to support and defend Iran's Christian communities, members of which are monitored closely by the government and intelligence services.[2]

Church attendance has been in a state of decline for years, as a result of increasingly heavy-handed monitoring by the state, bans on Persian-language services (Landinfo, 2013: 11), and the outright closure of many of Iran's last churches (ICHRI, 2013a). Muslim converts have always faced particular difficulties participating in public church services, as they are at risk of being charged with apostasy should they be identified by intelligence agents.

The Christian 'house church' movement arose as a reaction to this crisis, allowing Iranian Christians to come together in private homes to hold services. Rooted in the private sphere, the house church model aims to provide a secure environment in which Iranian Christians may congregate away from the prying eyes of state authorities.[3]

Although they are safer than public congregations, house churches cannot promise total security for participants. In recent years, authorities have intensified their efforts to smother the movement through infiltration and raids (Ibid: 10), often assisted by tip-offs from neighbours (Landinfo, 2013: 16).

> *House churches work as a team; the Zionists and Westerners have targeted our society's identity and people's religion; they want to create crises, mislead the society and deprive them of their identity.*
> Hojjat al-Islam Abbas Kaebi, Member of the Assembly of Experts, 2010 (ICHRI, 2013b: 25)

2

A 2013 report suggested that state agents frequently requested ID numbers from citizens upon entering and leaving churches, adding them to a database for further surveillance (Landinfo, 2013). This practice is less frequent as of 2014, given that all major publicly-operating evangelical churches in Iran have been closed down.

3

House church congregations splinter upon hitting a certain size (often around 10 people), in order to maintain small—and therefore discreet—prayer groups. (Landinfo, 2013: 19)

Online and satellite platforms have provided safer alternatives for Christians to take part in religious services. Iran Alive Ministries has a channel named 'Church SeVen' which broadcasts church services into viewers' living rooms. This has enabled Iranian Christians to experience services without having to endure the risk of government harassment that attending an above-ground service often entails.
(Small Media, 2014a: 63)

> *We want you to know that my family and I put on our best clothes, got our chairs and our Bibles, and we sat down, watched the program together, and we attended church for the first time.*
> A Church SeVen viewer (Ibid)

These new online church services have made a significant difference to the lives of evangelical Christians in Iran, providing them with spaces in which they may partake in religious ceremonies with a greater sense of security and privacy.

Synagogues in Cyberspace - A Global Community of Persian Jews

Although Judaism is officially recognised and protected under the Iranian constitution, the country's Jewish community continues to face unique challenges. As well as being forced to endure the frequent anti-Semitic diatribes of clerics that clumsily conflate Judaism with Zionism, the community has been weakened considerably in the wake of decades of mass emigration.

Digital Diaspora: Jewish Responses to Mass Emigration

Around a third of Iran's Jewish population emigrated to Israel between the years 1948 and 1953, with a further 50,000 making the decision to leave the country between 1979-86 (Price, 2005). This has left old institutions and organisations with diminished memberships, eroding Iranian Jews' sense of community and endangering their ancient religio-cultural identity. As with Christians and Baha'is, Iranian Jews have increasingly sought solutions online.

Although Jewish communities have declined sharply in many cities, the rising popularity of social networks has allowed Jewish Iranians from geographically distant cities to build new connections. This process has served to ameliorate the sense of isolation and cultural decline felt by some Iranian Jews (particularly those from smaller towns and cities).

> *Hi, I am very interested to meet or speak with a Jew. If there is someone who can help or guide me, I'd be thankful.*
> 'Nima', on a Persian-language Facebook page serving the Jewish community (Small Media, 2014a: 84)

This process spans the globe. Jointly run from Los Angeles and Tehran, the website 7Dorim was set up as a means for Iranian Jews the in diaspora to learn about the history and culture of their religious community through religious texts, historical accounts, and interactive tours of some of Iran's largest synagogues (Ibid: 82). Such initiatives provide a valuable bridge between diaspora communities at high risk of losing their religio-cultural identities, and beleaguered communities back in Iran.

Seeking Refuge: Iran's LGBT Community

Iranians who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender (LGBT) are frequently subject to widespread state persecution and endemic societal discrimination.[4] As a result, many LGBT people have been forced to leave the country, with the majority languishing in Turkish refugee camps for extended periods. However, many other LGBT Iranians have remained, contributing to the growth of Iran's increasingly tech-dependent LGBT community.

The internet has been a central pillar of support for Iran's sexual minorities. The web offers comparatively safe networking opportunities for LGBT people in the country, countering their isolation and allowing them to build wider social networks in which they may speak freely and honestly.

Proud Voices - The Growth of Online Activism

Online platforms provide a space for activism in support of the LGBT community. Whereas public discourses around homosexuality are dominated by intolerant religious conservatives, the internet allows LGBT Iranians to access and engage with more liberal viewpoints. In this way, online resources can attenuate the feelings of guilt and shame the dominant narrative often provokes in members of the LGBT community.

One prominent resource for LGBT Iranians was Ketabkhaneh88, an online queer book fair launched to coincide with the opening of Tehran's International Book Fair in May 2009.[5] Originally hosting user-

[4]

Same-sex sexual relations are forbidden under Iran's penal code. The Penal Code defines sodomy (lavvat) as sexual intercourse between two men, and prescribes the death penalty for both parties (provided they are mature, and that the judge receives either a confession, or the testimony of four witnesses). For juveniles, the law prescribes 74 lashes each. For lesbianism, the law prescribes 100 lashes for each party. An individual's fourth successive conviction potentially carries the death penalty (Islamic Penal Code: Book II, Chapter II).

[5]

In order to publish in Iran, authors must have their work approved by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which rejects all books deemed to contain 'immoral' contentis being conducted in four primary, as well as texts written by openly LGBT figures (Index on Censorship, 2013). For more on literary censorship in Iran, see Chapter 5.

submitted works on the Blogfa blogging platform, Ketabkhaneh88 was quickly blocked by the government. Regardless, its content was later published on Blogspot, and made freely available to users employing circumvention tools (Small Media, 2012: 64-65).

In recent years, online publishers have enabled authors to circumvent the official application process and publish their works as e-books, with the online publishing company Gilgamishaan set up exclusively for the publication of LGBT titles. As well as offering authors the opportunity to have their forbidden works presented to a wider audience, Gilgamishaan and Ketabkhaneh88 also demonstrated to LGBT people that they can make valuable contributions to Iran's literary culture.

The internet does not serve as a wholly positive force in terms of advancing the position of LGBT Iranians. As an open forum it also provides a platform for homophobes and religious conservatives to air their views, which can serve to further entrench the prejudices that beset the LGBT community in Iran (Small Media, 2012: 51).

Meeting People - LGBT Dating and Networking

The internet also provides LGBT people with new opportunities for making connections. Due to the oppression of the LGBT community in Iran, traditional avenues for meeting new people are all but closed off. Whereas 'cruising' the streets of major cities is one (risky) option available to gay Iranians, technology has introduced countless new opportunities for connecting with potential friends, hook-ups, or partners.

A notable example of this is Manjam, a social networking website that utilises GPS and 'social discovery' technology to connect gay and bisexual men. This website is extremely popular with Iranians both inside and outside the country.

While websites like Manjam may provide a safer and more dignified option for meeting people than cruising the streets, they are not thought to be entirely danger-free. There have been isolated reports of government officials infiltrating these websites, and even joining LGBT Facebook groups in order to trap, harass, and abuse gay Iranians (Ibid: 62-3). Even if this phenomenon is not particularly widespread, such stories are enough to instill a sense of fear and paranoia into the LGBT community in Iran.

LGBT-targeted mobile phone apps have also entered the Iranian market in recent years, with apps such as Grindr allowing users to chat and arrange meet-ups with ease. However, these platforms carry a number of significant security risks; a recent investigation into Grindr security flaws demonstrated that the app could be exploited to see the precise location of Iranian users, making them vulnerable to arrest and entrapment (America Blog, 2014).

Although the internet has empowered Iran's LGBT community with countless networking and organisational tools, it has also made LGBT Iranians much easier to track, identify, and entrap. At the same time, the government has been working very proactively to smother these emerging communities, using every means at its disposal to impede users' access to content,[6] and promote the growth of conservative activism in cyberspace.

6

For more information on the tools Iran uses to filter, track, and intercept internet users, see Chapter 2.

Counter-Counter-Culture: Iranian Government Responses to Online Opposition

Not all online communities in Iran are treated with such open hostility by the state. In fact, one of the most striking online developments in the past five years has been the emergence of the 'Arzeshi' community - Iran's extensive network of conservative and religious bloggers, united in their devotion to Supreme Leader Khamenei and the ideology of the Islamic Republic.

In the aftermath of the chaotic presidential election of 2009, the rising tide of anti-regime sentiment in cyberspace prompted the Ahmadinejad government and Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) to invest in the promotion of conservative online content. Although the movement was initially propelled by the efforts of the conservative establishment to play 'catch-up' with reformists, it soon took on a life of its own and fragmented. These divisions in the online community deepened over time, and thereby opened a window into the factionalism dividing conservatives in the Islamic Republic today.

Organised Resistance - The Emergence of the Arzeshi Community

Iranian officials have claimed the existence of tens of thousands of Arzeshi activists online, who are working to combat reformists and anti-government activists in cyberspace. Research conducted by Small Media has corroborated this, to an extent. A huge Arzeshi online blogging

network is in existence, comprised of over 67,000 blogs and websites (Small Media, 2014b). But these statistics cannot tell the full story; the vast majority of these blogs are essentially bare in terms of the content they offer, and receive no significant online traffic (Ibid).

Furthermore, the Arzeshi does not seem to be a cohesive and purposeful political force working to disseminate revolutionary values, but rather a fractured online community of bickering conservative factions. This is borne out by their failure to rally around a single candidate in the 2013 presidential elections, and the poorly connected nature of the community: only 1.4% of blogs in the extended network are 'well-connected', receiving 25 or more links from other Arzeshi sites.

The fact that many of these conservative blogs are both poorly connected and content-poor further supports the notion of government involvement. While it is possible that a vast conservative blogosphere spontaneously emerged and was then almost immediately abandoned, a more plausible explanation is that the state wanted to create the impression of strength on social media by stimulating the growth of thousands of blogs, which were not subsequently maintained.

This state-backed effort was undertaken with specific goals in mind, having emerged out of an extraordinary political context. Public statements from governmental and IRGC officials[7] suggest that thousands of conservative bloggers were trained in response to the growth of reformist-aligned online activism in the wake of the 2009 election controversy.[8] The flooding of Iranian cyberspace with conservative content was designed to counter the dominance of Green Movement narratives online.

Overconfidence - Crackdowns on Conservative Online Activists

Although the government played a central role in bringing the Arzeshi community to life, once it became active, the authorities found it difficult to control. Factionalism has prevented a cohesive online force from forming, and has resulted in conservative bloggers causing trouble for authorities. Blogs have been closed down; bloggers have been arrested.

The story of regime supporter Amir Hassan Sagha illustrates this paradox. Sagha published a blog post accusing Sadegh Larijani, the

[7]
IRGC Commander Bahram Hosseini Motlagh announced the training of between 15000-20000 conservative bloggers in November 2010 (in Fars News, 2010) http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8909011176

[8]
The reformist Green Movement made extensive use of social media in the aftermath of the controversial 2009 elections. For more on the role of social networks in the 2009 post-election protests, see (Moghanizadeh, 2013)

head of Iran's Judiciary, and his brother Ali Larijani, the parliamentary speaker, of abusing their political power and silencing their opponents. Two days after the post was made, Sagha was arrested and his blog closed down. Regardless of one's political orientation, writing open criticisms of powerful members of the establishment remains deeply risky (Small Media, 2014b).

The fate of the Arzeshi community illustrates three important points about the internet in Iran. Firstly, by supporting a group of bloggers to do its rhetorical bidding online, the Iranian authorities have demonstrated how powerful they believe public discourse on the internet to be.

Secondly, the factionalism that came to define the Arzeshi demonstrates the unpredictable and contentious nature of the internet as a forum for debate, a forum over which the government is unable to exert much editorial control.

Thirdly, the persecution of some conservative bloggers illustrates the inherent risks associated with speaking out online, even for those advancing views that putatively cohere with the government line.

In short, the case of the Arzeshi underlines the complex nature of the internet as a venue for public discussion: it is a relatively open forum in which it is difficult for the government to control the conversation. Yet there is no guarantee that broaching certain topics won't be met with harsh reprisals on the part of the authorities. Although conservative bloggers do not receive the same level of online surveillance as sexual and religious minorities, they still need to watch themselves.

Blogging Is So Passé: Changing Spaces of Online Communities

The platforms of online debate and community building have changed dramatically over the past decade. Iran was once host to one of the most thriving blogging communities in the world, but the ascendance of social networking platforms has eroded the influence of 'Blogestan'.

Iran became a "nation of bloggers" between early 2000 and 2009, as a vibrant, diverse set of online blogs became the platform for expression for thousands of Iranians...Those blogs emerged as a space for active, intense, ongoing discussions on everything from politics to poetry.
Fred Petrossian, Arash Abadpour and Mahsa Alimardani (Washington Post, 2014)

Iranians are still engaging in online discussions, they've simply switched platforms. Whereas blogs were once thriving hubs of engagement, today social networks serve as the primary venues for community-building, debate, and activism.

From 2000 to 2009, most online communities organised themselves using blogs. More recently, the Iranian blogosphere has been in a state of rapid decline. One study found that only around 20% of the most prominent blogs active in 2009 were still online in September 2013 (Iran Media Program, 2014: 24). The bloggers who remain are far less active than they used to be, with 70% of respondents publishing one post per month or less (ibid).

While the Baha'is use Skype and Moodle to run their online university and develop education networks, and the conservative community has embraced blogs as a means of disseminating ideological and political content, commonalities between these groups also exist.

Facebook's popularity cuts across all of these communities, with even conservative communities openly flouting the ban on social networks to disseminate religious and conservative content more widely (Small Media, 2014b).[9]

Religious groups host social and theological debates on Facebook. Whereas some groups remain publically accessible in the hope of stimulating discussion with non-adherents,[10] others remain closed or private, enabling participants to engage without the fear of being identified by Iran's police or intelligence services. Many LGBT groups are fearful of infiltration and entrapment, and remain closed and secretive as a result.

Facebook groups generally provide a freer environment for community discussions than official organisational websites. Whereas the websites of Iran-based Zoroastrian organisations tend to be apolitical and strictly community-focused (thereby discouraging undue government attention), Facebook groups are far more provocative in their content.

An examination of active Zoroastrian Facebook groups quickly reveals the prevalence of pre-Islamic Iranian nationalism and anti-clericalism as dominant discussion strands within the community. This is because social networks are semi-private spaces in which community members can express their grievances without exposing public organisations to harassment and intimidation from state authorities.

[9]
Although Facebook is blocked by the authorities, usage is ubiquitous owing to widespread usage of circumvention technology. For more on this topic, see Chapter 2.

[10]
The Baha'is maintain one open group for Iranians with over 7000 members, whereas two evangelical Christian groups exist with over 3500 members each (Small Media, 2014)

Online Communities: Risks and Rewards

Online platforms have opened up spaces for marginalised and niche groups to organise and discuss. We have found these spaces to be particularly important for at-risk groups, who are often prevented from organising activities in public spaces. Although the government attempts to filter and control online spaces, it is ultimately unable to control the parameters of online debate.

Online platforms have been able to facilitate tangible improvements in the lives of oppressed individuals. Whether providing a Baha'i woman with a university degree, a gay man with essential support and information, or a Christian the opportunity to go to church in their living room, technology has driven massive improvements in the lives of millions of Iranian minority communities.

Many of the risks these communities face in society also carry over to online spaces. Although social media platforms provide space for alternative discourse, they are also a channel for the propagation of hegemonic conservative ideologies. Vulnerable minorities can also be verbally abused, tracked, and entrapped by the authorities in these spaces. While the future of cyber communities in Iran is difficult to predict, battles between the government and minority groups will increasingly be fought online. ◊

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5. WRITER'S BLOCK: IRANIAN LITERARY CENSORSHIP AND DIASPORA PUBLISHING

by James Marchant

🔍

Free from the obligation to have texts vetted by hard-nosed censors, online diaspora publishers have provided Iranian writers with a means of escaping the tight confines of the domestic market, and connect them with a worldwide readership.

It is commonly said that all Iranian homes will possess at least two books: the Qur'an, and the poetry of Hafez's *Divan*. Iran's rich literary culture has played an important role in forging a sense of national identity and has had a profound influence on the development of Islamic philosophy and culture. But today, the country's most talented authors, poets, and publishers are under siege from the Islamic Republic's conservative establishment. Their works are subjected to the state censor's thick red marker pen, and acts of literary subversion can result in harsh jail sentences.

With Iranian literature robbed of much of its power to challenge and critique the political order, authors are forced to either shroud their messages in innumerable layers of allegory and metaphor, or else look further afield to get published.

This chapter offers an overview of the state of book publishing in Iran, explaining how the industry has fought for survival under authoritarian regimes before and after 1979, and describing the hurdles prospective authors must overcome to get their work past the censors at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG). It also shows how technological developments have allowed organisations based in the diaspora to emerge as leading hubs of activity and innovation in the Iranian literary world.

Revolutionary Road: Publishing and the Iranian Revolution

Literary censorship was not a striking new innovation of the post-revolutionary regime; it was practiced by Iranian authorities long before the 1979 Revolution that swept Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini to power. This segment discusses how literary censorship evolved under the Pahlavi regime, eventually serving as the basis for the Islamic Republic's own harsh censorship programme.

Red Roses Are Forbidden - Pre-Revolutionary Literary Censorship

The roots of Iran's tight censorship programme stretch back into the pre-revolutionary past and are closely intertwined with those of the country's fearsome intelligence services. Ever since the formation of SAVAK in 1957, literary works have been subject to extensive scrutiny from authorities, who have feared the subversive and revolutionary potential of the written word.

These fears were not without basis; Iranian authors were deeply politicised throughout the Pahlavi period. The acclaimed writer Houshang Golshiri attested to this, describing how Iranian literature had become little more than a 'vehicle for political analysis' in late Pahlavi Iran:

> *If people had forgotten the events of [the 1953 coup against Mossadegh], literature intended to somehow transmit this information, because the mass media would not do so. Or, for instance, if torture existed in prisons, in essence, if strugglers were arrested and prisons existed, literature accepted the responsibility of transmitting even such simple bits of information.*
>
> Houshang Golshiri (in Ghanoonparvar, 1985: 354-5)

Leftist authors and commentators dominated the Iranian intelligentsia through the 1950s, 60s and 70s, and bore the brunt of SAVAK's censorial campaign as a result. Books that criticised the Shah's regime or promoted political radicalism were blacklisted and banned.[1] Forbidden texts formed the basis of a literary black market, with 'white cover books' (named for their anonymous white dust covers) available 'under the counter' in specialist bookshops (Mahloujian, 2002).

The Pahlavi state didn't just censor books after they hit the shelves. Prior to publication, all books had to gain licensing approval from the

[1]

Even books available on the shelves could get readers in trouble. In some cases, sales were monitored by SAVAK, and customers could face a visit from the police, or even imprisonment if they took home the wrong book (Sandler, 1986: 3)

Ministry of Culture and Art (Mollanazar, 2010: 167). Keyword blacklists were devised to help censors sniff out any dissenting authors injecting politically inflammatory terms into their literature. These forbidden terms included 'black night' (taken to indicate repression and despair), 'high walls' (coded language for imprisonment), and even 'red rose' (an international symbol of socialist solidarity and revolution) (Mahloujian, 2002).

Even authors who managed to evade the censors sometimes became victims of the state's paranoia. The nationally celebrated author Mahmoud Dowlatabadi was imprisoned by SAVAK from 1974-6.[2] When he asked his captors what crime he had been charged with, they replied:

> *None. But everyone we arrest seems to have copies of your novels*
> SAVAK Officer (in Rohter, 2012)

Iranian authors are no strangers to censorship, harassment, and imprisonment. Pre-publication censorship has remained a tool of the establishment for many decades, long preceding the Islamic Revolution, though the rules have become more stringent since 1979. More topics have been ruled out of bounds, and the censors have tightened up their censorship processes to make publishing even more difficult for Iran's writers.

No Time For Books: Revolution, War, and the Written Word

The period immediately following the Islamic Revolution was one of great openness. With the fall of the Shah, 'white cover' books flooded into the markets, and the Pahlavi state's censorship apparatus was buried along with SAVAK. One commentator stated in 1981 that:

> *Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iran has witnessed a period of apparently free journalistic and literary activities. But… the real reason for the proliferation of political publishing is the lack of control over the affairs of the country.*
> Wolfgang Behn (1981: 10)

This situation didn't last. As the Islamic Republic reasserted the authority of central government, it brought the intelligence establishment back from the grave, and absorbed Iran's censorship apparatus into the new Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.
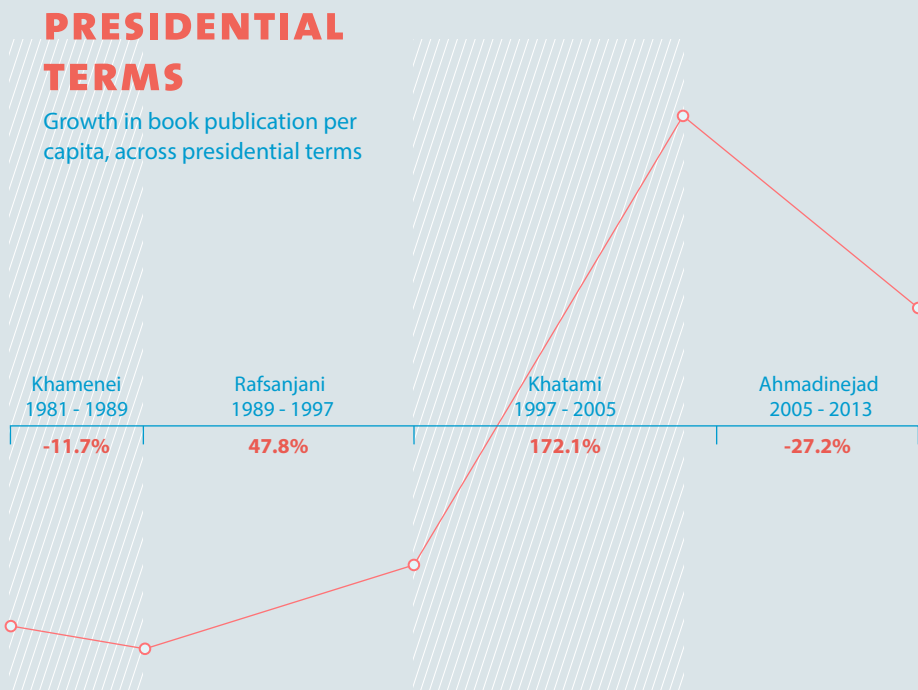
[2]
Dowlatabadi was famed for his 3000-page epic Kelidar, which followed several generations of a Kurdish nomadic family. Grounded in rough, everyday language, it aimed to give voice to the lived experiences of rural life in Iran, and became very popular among left-wing activists.

TOTAL BOOKS PER CAPITA

Total number of books published per capita, 1985-2013

5

2005
4.79

4

2013
3.49

3

2

1985
1.35

1997
1.76

1

1989
1.19

0

1985   1988   1991   1994   1997   2000   2003   2006   2009   2013

PRESIDENTIAL TERMS

Growth in book publication per capita, across presidential terms

Khamenei 1981 - 1989	Rafsanjani 1989 - 1997	Khatami 1997 - 2005	Ahmadinejad 2005 - 2013
-11.7%	**47.8%**	**172.1%**	**-27.2%**

figure 1: **PUBLICATION STATISTICS 1985-2013**

Revolution Decoded
5. Writer's block: Iranian literary censorship
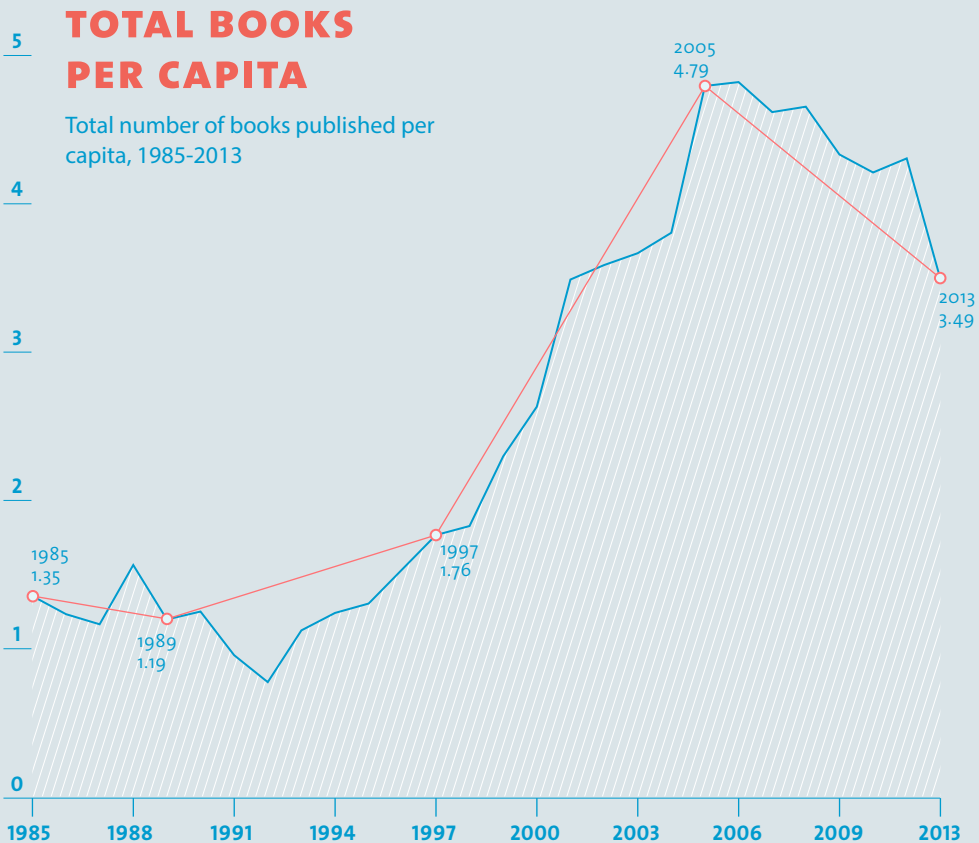and diaspora publishing
87

First censoring books about the Pahlavi monarchy, the MCIG soon extended its blacklist to include any texts contravening conservative interpretations of Islamic law, including leftist political or philosophical works, along with many scientific volumes concerning controversial topics such as Darwinian evolution (Mahloujian, 2002). In the early post-revolutionary period, the MCIG was assisted in this cultural purge by Hezbollahi militias that attacked bookshops and burned 'immoral' books en masse (Ibid).

The onset of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) deepened the crisis facing Iranian authors and publishers. While left-wing authors were pushed out of the public sphere, religious writers and poets were promoted to produce war-themed works (Talattof, 2000: 124) and advance state ideology (Ibid: 134)

Trade blockades, paper rationing, and an intensification of wartime censorship policies further precipitated the collapse of the publishing sector (Mahloujian, 2002). Iran's 'Cultural Revolution' (1980-87) squeezed academics and publishers, as universities were closed and books banned.[3] The dire predicament of the industry is illustrated by official publication figures from Iran's National Library (see Figure I), showing a gradual decline in the number of books published until the close of the war in 1988.

In 1989 Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was elected as President on a platform of radical economic reform and post-war reconstruction. To this end, his office launched a reform program consisting of two Five-Year Plans, the first being focused on infrastructure development, economic liberalisation, and extensive healthcare and education reforms. Publishing received minimal state support during this period, and the sector struggled along with the rest of the economy.

The effect of economic decay was severe. Despite Rafsanjani's appointment of the liberal Mohammad Khatami as Cultural Minister from 1989-92, official figures show a decline in per capita publication figures over this period (see Figure I). These numbers remained stagnant until 1995, when the Iranian economy began to show early signs of post-war economic recovery (though this recovery was hampered by the imposition of US sanctions in the same year).

Rafsanjani failed to expend any significant political capital on cultural liberalisation. Cultural politics remained in the shadow of the war and

3
The 'Cultural Revolution' began in 1980 under the supervision of Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini, with the intention of injecting Islamic culture and values into society. The Cultural Revolution primarily targeted Iran's universities, and saw the large-scale purging of ideologically-suspect lecturers and student leaders.

revolution throughout the mid-1990s, with conservative pragmatists dominating the political sphere. It would take the reformist political landslide of 1997 to change all that.

Damage Limitation - The Khatami Era

The 1997 election of Rafsanjani's reformist Cultural Minister Mohammad Khatami to the presidency signalled a dramatic shift in the rhetoric and practice of literary censorship in the Islamic Republic. The appointment of more liberal Cultural Ministers, such as Ata'ollah Mohajerani and Ahmad Masjed-Jamei saw the MCIG take a more permissive approach to publishing. The comparatively laissez faire approach to censorship in the Khatami-era MCIG is reflected in the rapid growth of official publication figures from 1997-2005 (see figure I).

But conservative opponents in parliament remained a thorn in the side of the Khatami administration. Parliament forced the resignation of Mohajerani in 2000 and blocked reformist efforts to simplify the MCIG's complex pre-publication censorship process in 2003 (Small Media, 2011: 20).

Frustrated by their inability to take an active role in managing and shaping Iran's cultural landscape, political conservatives instead engaged in large-scale campaigns of slander and misinformation about high-profile Iranian writers and journalists (Ibid: 8). Hardline elements in the Information Ministry were also implicated in the 'Chain Murders' of a number of notable dissident writers and publishers such as Dariush Forouhar, Ebrahim Zalzadeh, and Mohammad Mokhtari (Sahimi, 2009).[4]

4
The 'Chain Murders' were a series of killings of dissident Iranian writers, journalists and activists between 1988 and 1998. Although the Intelligence Ministry was blamed for the murders, international courts have ruled that they were undertaken with the full knowledge of President Rafsanjani and Supreme Leader Khamenei. For more information, see: (Sahimi, 2009)

Although Khatami's government was eventually able to root out and prosecute the officers responsible for the killings, the crisis was a stark reminder to Iran's intelligentsia that reformist politicians could only do so much to protect them from the retribution of hardline elements in the state establishment.

Although Khatami was ultimately unable to effect a concrete and long-term transformation of the relationship between the MCIG's censors and Iran's publishing sector, his government was at least capable of limiting the excesses of the conservative establishment, and granting authors and publishers some space for free expression.

Damage Escalation - Eight Years of Ahmadinejad

The long resurgence of Iran's publishing sector under Khatami stalled with the ascendance of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency. During his administration, the MCIG once again took up position as the stern arbiter and enforcer of Islamic cultural values, while the conservative press was empowered to tear chunks out of opposition intellectuals and writers.

Overt acts of repression against intellectuals began soon after Ahmadinejad's inauguration. One of the first major crackdowns on the literary establishment took place in 2007, when a number of popular 'cafe bookshops' were closed down by state authorities. Although officially closed on the basis of legal technicalities,[5] the owner of the bookshop Badragheye Javidan was told by one official:

> *All of the cultural depravity in this country stems from bookshops such as yours.*
> Unnamed government official (in Small Media, 2012: 23)

This crackdown was accompanied by a general tightening of regulations at the MCIG under Ahmadinejad's hardline Cultural Minister Mohammed Hossein Saffar-Harandi. Saffar-Harandi oversaw the government's policy of demanding the 'renewal' of all publishing permits issued before 2005, resulting in massive processing backlogs at the MCIG (International Publishers Association, 2009: 7). Many books permitted by the Khatami administration were blacklisted after 2005, with Saffar-Harandi insisting that his MCIG's tougher measures were necessary to stop publishers from serving "a poisoned dish to the young generation" (Tait, 2006).

These policies saw a decline in the number of books published (see Figure I), and the outright ban of numerous works from internationally acclaimed authors.[6] The policies of Saffar-Harandi did much to reverse the advances made under Khatami, with numerous domestically produced novels (such as Ebrahim Golestan's The Cock) also failing to get past the Ahmadinejad-era MCIG censors (Kamali Dehghan, 2008).

Harassment and intimidation of writers skyrocketed during Ahmadinejad's second term. The chaos of the post-2009 presidential election protests unleashed a wave of reaction from the state and its

5

Authorities insisted that commercial properties could not operate as bookshops and cafes simultaneously.

6

The Ahmadinejad-era reforms saw works banned from authors including:

Gabriel Garcia Marquez // Memories of My Melancholy Whores– Banned after the publication of a furious article in conservative newspaper Tabnak, despite previously having been granted a license by Saffar-Harandi's MCIG

Fyodor Dostoyevski // The Gambler– A short novel following the various gambles (figurative and literal) undertaken by Russian aristocrats and their staff

Tracy Chevalier // Girl With A Pearl Earring– A bestselling historical novel imagining the relationship between artist Johannas Vermeer and his servant (and model) Griet

Sadegh Hedayat // The Blind Owl– A surreal, subversive work from 1930s Iran, by a prominent secularist author

supporters. A 2011 IHRDC report suggests that the Basij-aligned 'Soft Security Strategic Think Tank' published a report in 2009 accusing seven publishers and dozens of writers and translators of conspiring with the 'Green Movement' to overthrow the Islamic Republic (2011: 10-11). Such accusations preceded a large-scale assault on the publishing sector, with 10 publishers closed in one fell swoop in 2011 (Parsine, 2011).

In the difficult post-2009 environment, even religious intellectuals were not spared from the paranoia of the government. Leading scholars Abdolkarim Soroush and Mostafa Malekian were accused of attempting to secularise society and promote false mysticism (Fars News, 2010).

At the same time, publishers deemed to be 'pro-revolutionary' were offered extensive state support. In March 2012, the MCIG Cultural Affairs Deputy Bahman Dorri announced that the government had provided a 565,000 USD loan to eighty religious publishers and supported the publication of more than 200 religious titles:

> *We are hoping that these publishers will publish valuable books with this money, to support the values of the holy regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran.*
> Bahman Dorri, Cultural Affairs Deputy (in Dolat, 2012)

The Ahmadinejad period was one marked by outright cultural authoritarianism. At the same time as the state took an active role in the promotion of ideologically sound publishers, it encouraged the suppression and large-scale censorship of authors it deemed subversive. The damage wrought upon the publishing sector from 2005-2013 was immense, and it is unclear how long it will take the industry to recover.

Turning a New Leaf? - Rouhani's Uncertain Promise

The departure of Ahmadinejad in 2013 and his replacement by the moderate Hassan Rouhani signalled some positive developments on the subject of cultural censorship. Rouhani's new Cultural Minister Ali Jannati publicly savaged the cultural policies of the Ahmadinejad era, stating in an interview:

> *If the Qur'an hadn't been sent by God and we had handed it to [the] book censors, they wouldn't have issued permission to publish it and would have argued that some of the words in it are against public virtue.*
> Ali Jannati, Cultural Minister (in Esfandiari, 2013)

Nonetheless, Jannati maintained that censorship should remain in force, justifying the practice by asking: "How can we allow some problematic books to poison... society?" (Ibid).

A year and a half into Rouhani's presidency, there have been no seismic shifts in censorship policy. Positive developments such as the January 2014 re-licensing of major publishing house Cheshmeh have been isolated events, and the pace of change is sluggish.

Publication license applications continue to pass through the MCIG at a glacial pace and with unpredictable outcomes. Until pre-publication policies are radically adjusted (or abolished altogether), Rouhani's promises for literary freedom will remain unfulfilled.

Hard Times: Getting Published in the Islamic Republic of Iran

The Islamic Republic's publishing process is staggeringly convoluted and unpredictable, and is responsible for provoking a great deal of financial, physical, and mental strain on Iranian authors and publishers.

This segment is a guide through the byzantine structures of the MCIG's censorship and publication system, describing the processes for achieving pre-publication permission.

Death By A Thousand Cuts - Censorship and Pre-Publication Licenses

The fortunes of authors and publishers in the Islamic Republic are largely dependent upon the policies (and idle whims) of the MCIG, which retains responsibility for granting pre-publication permission to Iranian publishers. The unpredictability of the licensing process causes endless heartache for authors, and ultimately serves to drain the vitality of the Iranian literary world.

One of the most significant problems arises from the fact that publishers must expend an enormous amount of time, energy, and money on a book in the pre-publication process without knowing whether or not the MCIG will even grant it a licence. Arash Hejazi describes how publishers have to commission the translation, copy-editing, typesetting, cover design, and proofreading of a book, before submitting it in a final press-quality .pdf to the MCIG's Book Department, where it will be reviewed (Hejazi, 2011).

The MCIG may then request changes, omissions, and re-writes of various segments of the book, which the author and publisher must then re-work, re-proof, and re-format prior to re-submission.

Alternatively, the MCIG's censors may decide that the book's content is simply too controversial, and deny a license outright, meaning that a publisher's investment is wasted. As well as causing nightmares for the publishers and authors who endure this fate, the potential for massive financial loss is forcing publishing houses to be conservative when it comes to signing authors, and investing money in initial manuscripts.

The MCIG undertakes pre-publication censorship on the basis of the guidelines listed in 'The Objectives and Policies and Conditions of Publishing Books'. Introduced under the Khatami administration in 1997, these regulations listed seven topics that would result in a book immediately being denied a publication license. The Ahmadinejad government approved an 2010 amendment that expanded this list to 27 points, forcing a multitude of topics out of the sphere of publically 'permissible' content.

Article 3 of the 1997 document stated that a book would be rejected if it contained material concerning:

1. Propagation and dissemination of atheism (blasphemy) and rejection of the principles of the faith

2. Dissemination of lewdness and ethical corruption

3. Encouraging society to oppose and revolt against the system of the Islamic Republic of Iran

4. Propagation and dissemination of the doctrines of unlawful, armed resistance, and misguided groups and defending the monarchy or dictatorial regimes.

5. Creation of turmoil and conflict amongst ethnic and religious groups,

6. Derision and weakening of national pride and the spirit of "love-for-homeland",

7.   Causing a disposition of alienation in favour of Western or Eastern cultures, civilisations, and colonial systems, the propagation of dependence on any world powers, and opposition to the policies and insights seeking to preserve independence. (Mollanazar, 2010)

The 2010 revision was dramatic, and saw Article 3 expanded from 7 to 27 regulations across three themes: 'Religion and Ethics', 'Politics and Society', and 'Rights and Public Culture'. New regulations include:

A5.   Stating details of sexual relationships, sins, and swearing that cause lewdness and ethical corruption.

A7.   Dissemination of pictures that cause lewdness and ethical corruption, such as dancing, drinking and sinful parties.

B10. The propagation of Zionism and other types of racism.

C4.   Propagation of hopelessness, nihilism, negative perspectives in society, and the promotion of public mistrust.

The guidelines introduced in 2010 are still in force today. Although President Rouhani has made vague promises about cultural liberalisation, the MCIG remains bound to these Ahmadinejad-era censorship guidelines. Unless these guidelines are revised once again, the MCIG's censors will retain the power to block the publication of works deemed contrary to Islamic values.

Have An Affair, But Please Do Not Kiss Your Child - The Erratic Practice of Censorship

The MCIG's censorship processes are often unpredictable, and the guidelines around permissible content are deeply ambiguous. As a result, many authors have endured some truly bizarre acts of censorship.

Small Media spoke with a number of authors and publishers who were willing to share some of their experiences dealing with the MCIG's censors. Many contributors chose to remain anonymous, for their safety, and that of their associates:

> *Some of the censors ask for the words 'boyfriend' and 'girlfriend' to be removed, while others leave them in.*
> Mehrshid Motevalli, translator (Nogaam, 2014)

> *In a play, the husband and wife are arguing while their child is crying in the other room. The father asks the mother go and soothe the child with a kiss. The censors asked for the kiss to be removed!*
> Anonymous playwright (2014, Interview)

> *In a story about the love affairs of married couples, containing love triangles and repeated infidelity, not a single word was censored! Despite the subject matter, the book contained no 'sensitive' words and was published without any problems, suggesting that the censorship process has become partly dependent on technology. The censors likely check the digital text against a database of keywords, and if it appears clean, they won't read it.*
> Anonymous author (2014, Interview)

> *One book adapted from the Old Testament was asked to remove references to the historical Kingdom of Israel.*
> Anonymous translator (2014, Interview)

The back-and-forth exchanges between censor and publisher can prove to be exhausting in some cases. During the translation of James Surowiecki's 'The Wisdom of Crowds', censors requested the alteration of the term 'gambling'. The translator subsequently changed the word to 'betting', but was rejected. Although the censors suggested the word 'investing', the translator eventually squeaked past by substituting the word 'playing', instead (Mostafi Rezaei, 2013).

With all this wrangling over textual details, authors sometimes lose their grip on their original work. One diaspora publisher recounted his experience of encouraging Iranian authors to submit their uncensored work to his company, and found that it was often impossible to obtain original manuscripts:

> *When we founded [publishing house] Naakojaa, we contacted many Iranian writers and told them that we could publish their books, including the censored parts, if they wanted their work to be read free from censorship. But many authors who gave their handwritten manuscripts to their original publishers said that they lacked access to the uncensored original, and that they don't even remember what was in it.*
> Tinouche Nazmjou, Naakojaa

Despite these complications, diaspora-rooted publishing houses such as Naakojaa are proving increasingly integral to the Persian-language literary world. Their growth, facilitated by global revolutions in communication and e-publishing, has had a significant impact upon the development of Persian literature in Iran, and around the world

Another Country: The Expanding Role of Diaspora Publishers

Owing to the volatile and unpredictable nature of the MCIG's censors, some Iranian authors have turned to publishing houses in the diaspora for support. Free from the obligation to obtain a publishing license, or to have texts vetted by hard-nosed ideologues, these publishers have provided Iranian writers with a means of escaping the tight confines of the domestic market, and connect them with a worldwide readership.

This following section introduces a number of these publishing houses—the big players, upstarts, and innovators—to show the diversity and vibrancy of these companies, and illustrate how they could potentially bring about a revolution in the way Iranian readers engage with literature.

Founding Fathers - Baran

Founded in Stockholm in 1991, *Baran* Publishing is one of the largest Persian-language publishing houses operating in the Iranian diaspora. To date, it has published over 350 books in Persian and translated ten into Swedish. Its stated goal is to provide a voice to censored Iranian authors, and unshackle writers from the limits imposed on them by the government:

> *From the very first days, our mission was to fight censorship. The censor has been dominant in the cultural atmosphere of our country for years, and has become a part of our lives and our habits.*
> Baran (2014)

But the priorities of *Baran* have changed subtly over the years. In 2011, *Baran* founder Masoud Mafan said that the publisher's focus had shifted towards providing support to Iranian authors in exile (Mafan, in RASSANEH, 2011).

Baran has so far maintained a traditional approach to publishing, with all books published in physical formats and sold either online, or in specialist bookshops across the globe. In an interview with Small Media, *Baran*'s director Masoud Mafan stated that the worldwide presence of the Iranian diaspora has made life difficult for the publisher: the distribution of books to such a disparate community is challenging (Mafan, 2014, Interview).

In order to overcome this issue, the publisher is looking to innovate, with Mafan announcing that his organisation intends to start publishing books in digital formats, as well as in print (Mafan, 2014, Interview).

Owing to its age and its established reputation amongst diaspora publishers, *Baran* has found immense success. Its publications have very long print runs for diaspora books, ranging from between 200 and 2000 copies for first editions. Generally, very few Iranian diaspora publications have print runs exceeding 1000 (Ibid).

Mafan added that diaspora-based publishing provided an opportunity for authors inside and outside Iran to evade not only the MCIG's censors, but it also helps authors to overcome the pervading sense that they must self-censor and limit their writing in order to get their work published.

Building Bridges - Naakojaa

Naakojaa is a Paris-based publishing house founded in February 2012. It publishes Persian-language literature in printed, audio, and e-book formats, and aims to promote the work of young Iranian writers who are unable to advance their careers inside Iran:

> *Naakoja is faithful to the fundamental principle of freedom to publish, without limitations. The only criteria we use to choose books is their quality...The fame and the work experience of the authors is not the main criteria in choosing and publishing books. Publishing the work of the young and less known authors and translators is one of the important goals of Naakoja.*
> Tinouche Nazmjou (2014, Interview)

In an interview with *RoozOnline*, *Naakojaa*'s founder Tinouche Nazmjou said that the publisher works to build bridges between the Persian literature produced inside and outside of Iran:

> *Many Iranians outside the country always had the question of how they can get their desired books, so I though an online bookstore could be the answer to their needs.*
> Tinouche Namzjou, (in RoozOnline, 2012)

Nazmjou explains that the reason *Naakojaa* publishes books in both electronic and physical formats is to provide different means for its audience to access its publications:

> *The experience of e-publishing in different countries has shown that it takes some time for people to start reading in this way... Therefore we decided to fulfil the need of the Iranians who haven't adopted this way by publishing physical books.*

The Wisdom of Crowds - Nogaam

Nogaam was established in December 2012 and is a London-based independent online publisher for Persian-language literature that is censored in Iran. To date, *Nogaam* has published 21 Persian-language books, and one English-language translation of a short-story collection.

Nogaam operates a unique model. Authors submit their manuscripts for review by an expert board and, if approved, the books become 'projects' on the website. Once this status is achieved, these projects can be 'crowdfunded' by supporters.

These projects receive support from Iranians based in diaspora, as well as inside Iran. If the necessary funds are raised, the books are published under a Creative Commons license. The author receives their fee, and the books are made freely available for download in .pdf and .epub formats.

Nogaam's director Azadeh Iravani told Small Media that the reason the publisher decided to produce books in this way was to bring e-publishing into Persian, and make the books accessible for Iranians all around the world, including in Iran.

> *There are many publishers outside Iran but they all have or had difficulties delivering the books to their audience. We thought by publishing ebooks we can facilitate the distribution. In other words we can keep the modern Persian literature alive by the use of modern means.*
> Azadeh Iravani, Nogaam (Interview, 2014)

Iravani is upbeat about the potential of diaspora e-publishing for emancipating Iranian writers from the MCIG's constraints. She says that publishing in diaspora is a liberating experience:

> *There is no-one you need to answer to. You don't have any barriers for publishing anything, and the publishing house can have its own policies. There is no system in place to limit you, and with the freedom of the internet you are connected to the whole world.*

But she also notes that being outside Iran has some disadvantages in terms of conducting business, and reaching a mass audience:

> *Not all authors and readers are online. It varies from city to city. You might not be able to find a potential reader. At the same time, your relationship with the author is different; you can't have any book launch events, for example, which affects the promotion of the book and limits it to the online world.*

Iravani says that her ambition for the future is to publish good books in different formats such as e-books, audio books and printing on demand. She would like to engage with more authors from different age groups, and to encourage older readers to recognise e-publishing as a new way of accessing texts alongside traditional printed books.

Brave New World: The Future of Iranian Publishing

Despite the election of the moderate Hassan Rouhani in 2013, the future of publishing in Iran is uncertain. Hardline conservatives remain entrenched in the political system and look set to replicate the obstructionism they undertook during the Khatami era. At the same time, the MCIG is still lumbered with the narrow rules and restrictions cooked up during the reactionary second term of Ahmadinejad's presidency.

Despite this gloomy picture on the domestic front, Iranian publishers have reasons to feel upbeat about the future of Persian literature. Empowered by the ongoing global revolution in e-publishing, Iranian publishers in the diaspora are giving voice to the silenced authors of Iran, offering them a means to reach international audiences and have their works sent back to readers at home.

The Iranian e-publishing sector is still in its infancy, but has the potential to fundamentally alter the dynamics of Iran's literary culture. More work is needed before this can happen; e-publishing houses require greater levels of investment in order to expand their activities, and more efforts should be undertaken to promote and legitimise their work inside Iran. Nonetheless, technological advancements have unleashed the potential for a literary revolution to take place in the Islamic Republic, one that could break the power of the censors once and for all. ◊

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6. FIBER OPTICS AND THE IRANIAN FUTURE

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Communications technology has helped alleviate some of the most difficult challenges faced by certain segments of Iranian society, but it can only do so much. Technology alone can't bring down the government, nor cure an ailing economy.

In this report we have explored how Iranians are using technology in innovative ways to organise communities, access information, and evade pervasive state censorship. Through a series of case studies, we have shown how communications technology has helped alleviate some of the most difficult challenges faced by certain segments of Iranian society.

Since the much-feted 'Twitter Revolution' of 2009, commentators have been excitedly heralding the potential for technology to effect transformative social, economic and political change in Iran.[1]

This optimism has been frequently misplaced: social media was not able to bring about change in 2009, and it is uncertain how much more effective it would be today in the face of expanded government efforts to monitor and control the internet.

Not every emerging tech sector is destined to produce a Silicon Valley, and this is especially true of one operating in an economic environment as challenging as Iran's. The following features shine a light on two much-hyped topics, questioning whether observers' enthusiasm is justified.

Our first feature interrogates the potential for social networks to act as effective forums for substantive social and political change by tracing a pair of high-profile campaigns over the course of 2014, cataloguing their achievements and failures. The second feature casts an eye over the emerging Iranian tech startup sector, asking whether it is heading for a dot com boom or bust.

#Iran in #2014: Social Media Campaigns in the Islamic Republic

Antonello Sacchetti

Twitter and Facebook are emerging as key forums to discuss political and social issues in Iran. These social media platforms are both blocked by Iran's broad-reaching internet filtering policy, but many Iranians access them using circumvention tools.

Increasingly, Iranians are adopting and localising some of the advocacy techniques that have become a staple of the global social media landscape in recent years. Among 2014's viral social media campaigns in Iran were #FreeIranianSoldiers and #MyStealthyFreedom, both of which were picked up by Iranian and foreign media.

#FreeIranianSoldiers

On February 6 2014, four Iranian soldiers were kidnapped by the militant Sunni group Jaish al-Adl (The Army of Justice) near the Pakistani border. Three days later the #FreeIranianSoldiers hashtag first appeared on Twitter. It was used for several months and saw a number of spikes in activity as the story developed.

The use of the #FreeIranianSoldiers hashtag enabled Iranians to show solidarity with the captured soldiers, and raise awareness about their plight. The message quickly spread beyond Iran; the fact that the hashtag was written in English helped it to gain traction with global media outlets such as the BBC (BBC, 2014) Al Jazeera (Al Jazeera, 2014) and Al Monitor (Karami, 2014).

When the armed group announced it had executed Jamshid Danaeifar on March 23, activity on Twitter skyrocketed. A Small Media investigation found that in the 24 hours following Danaeifar's execution, 1,972 tweets bearing the #FreeIranianSoldiers hashtag were posted, a 4695% increase compared with the previous 24-hour period (Small Media, 2014). Twitter users condemned the terrorist group and criticized the Iranian government's handling of the situation, demanding more efforts to free the soldiers.

One user was appalled by the conservatives' decision to invest in an advertising campaign against EU High Representative Catherine Ashton during a time of such crisis:

> *That… company that made those propaganda billboards criticising Obama and Ashton couldn't make a simple one for those five soldiers?*
> @mmosafer (in Ibid)

Some individuals speculated that the Iranian government was hoping
for the abducted soldiers to be killed, which would give them an excuse
to crack down on dissent in Sistan and Baluchestan Province:

> *I think [the government] wants these soldiers to become martyrs, so
> they'll have more reasons to suppress Sunnis.*
> @silence_is_good (in Ibid)

Iranian users tweeted about the crisis for more than two months. The
tone of their appeals varied along a continuum from frustration and
scorn to heartfelt pleas for the remaining four soldiers to be freed.
When the soldiers were released on April 4, the good news spread
quickly on Twitter via images, videos, and celebratory text using the
#FreeIranianSoldiers hashtag.

The most widely shared tweet in the aftermath of the soldiers' release
came from "Instant News", which cited a Fars News report:

> *Fars: The four captured border guards, and the body of Martyr
> Danaeifar have been released to Iranian officials.*
> @Khabar_F (in Ibid)

Although the activity on Twitter was successful in bringing the
event under national and international scrutiny, it wasn't simply an
awareness-raising campaign. Iranian Twitter users also made use of
the hashtag to implore the government to take action to secure the
soldiers' release, and express their anger and disappointment with the
state's meagre response.

#MyStealthyFreedom

Ambitious social campaigns also took centre stage on Iran's social
media landscape in 2014. On May 3 2014, the London-based Iranian
journalist Masih Alinejad launched a campaign named 'My Stealthy
Freedom', which is active across both Facebook and Twitter.
The campaign began when Alinejad invited Iranian women to publish
'selfies' taken in public places in Iran on the campaign's official
Facebook page. The catch? None of them were to be wearing the
legally-mandated hijab.

This simple and effective campaign challenges the strictly enforced
dress code laws of the Islamic Republic. In an interview with ABC News,

Alinejad stated that she does not oppose the hijab, but rather the system by which it is forced upon women:

> *There are a lot of women who exist in Iran who are suffering under forced hijab, but they don't have any permission from the government to take to the street and protest or take to the media and speak out. They're fighting every day, but they've been ignored.*
> Masih Alinejad (in ABC News, 2014)

Even Alinejad herself was taken aback by the campaign's immediate success. Within a few days, the page was filled with hundreds of photos and videos featuring women from all over Iran. By May 23, the page had been 'liked' over 345,000 times.

> *I am tired of this mandatory hejab… my stealthy freedom at the Persian Gulf*
> Anonymous contributor (My Stealthy Freedom, 2014)

> *What I fear is living under the shadow of this compulsion forever! not
> their finding out that I have uncovered my hair*
> Anonymous contributor (Ibid, 2014)

While the campaign was initially geared towards Iranian women,
contributions came flooding in by Iranian men expressing their
solidarity.

> *I, as an Iranian man, totally support my nation's women's rights;
> especially their freedom of choice of clothing!*
> Anonymous contributor (Ibid, 2014)

The campaign quickly branched out to Twitter and Instagram with the hashtag #MyStealthyFreedom, and was amplified by excitable European and North American media outlets ranging from Radio Free Europe (2014) to Italy's Corriere (2014), which hyped the story and helped it reach a wide international audience.

For a social media campaign, #MyStealthyFreedom is extraordinarily resilient and long-lived; its Facebook page has slowly morphed into a space for the advancement of broader discourses around Iranian feminism.

Vindictive responses from the Iranian authorities and state media were lobbied against the campaign with the intent of discrediting it. The semi-official Fars agency—closely aligned with the Revolutionary Guard—launched a vicious press campaign against Masih Alinejad, accusing her of espionage and disinformation. Iran's state broadcaster IRIB aired a report alleging that Alinejad took mind-altering drugs before being stripped naked and raped by three men on the London Underground in front of her young son (Alinejad, 2014).

In a pointed response, Alinejad posted a video of herself singing on the platform of London's Temple station (Alinejad, 2014). That the authorities concocted such a horrifying story is testament to the apprehension the #MyStealthyFreedom caused amongst the clerical establishment.

The clerical establishment is not entirely united on this front. In a September 7 tweet, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani criticized Iran's 'morality police':

> *Our society demands modesty, but our culture will not and cannot be corrected with the help of minivans, soldiers and guards*
> @HassanRouhani (2014)

Activity was once again reinvigorated on the My Stealthy Freedom Facebook page following the acid attacks in Isfahan, which were targeted against women deemed to be improperly veiled (Kamali Dehghan, 2014). Users expressed their outrage by posting videos of protests against the acid attacks. Following the outpouring of emotion, one of the moderators of the Facebook page issued a call for solidarity:

> *Our inbox is full of messages filled with sadness and despair. The acid attacks have shaken us to the core, but let's be strong*

> *and not lose hope.*
> My Stealthy Freedom (2014)

'My Stealthy Freedom' has provided an outlet for increased dialogue about and protests against forced veiling in Iran. It has also given Iranian women the opportunity to represent themselves on their own terms, unmediated by Western discourses or Islamic morality. The Facebook page currently has over 700,000 'likes,' and new images of unveiled women in Iran are uploaded daily. The momentum generated by this campaign shows no signs of abating.

Startups or Non-Starters? The Prospects of Iran's Tech Sector

Antonello Sacchetti and Kyle Bowen

Over the past two years, interest in Iran's startup scene has blossomed among international and domestic observers. This feature introduces the various opportunities and challenges facing Iranian tech startups and their investors, while assessing the prospects for growth in this new sector. Outwardly, the Iranian market is to all appearances a sizeable and tech-savvy one.

Enthusiastic supporters of Iran's startup sector describe Iran as a regional hub of technology with a well-developed communication network. According to (hotly-disputed) official government figures, Iran had 45 million internet users in 2013 (Internet World Stats, 2014) —the highest figure in the MENA region.[2]

Some sources estimate Iran's mobile phone penetration rate now exceeds 120% (Malayeri, in Startup Istanbul, 2014). These phones aren't all low-tech models, either; mobile internet access is taking off rapidly in the wake of the government's decision to grant 3G and 4G licences to the two main Iranian mobile telephone operators in September 2014 (Small Media, 2014a: 8).

The country's demographics are also encouraging for tech entrepreneurs. Iran's population is young, highly educated, and seemingly well-positioned to develop a thriving technology sector. Around 60% of the Iranian population is under the age of 30 (Memarian and Nesvaderani, 2012), and several Iranian universities excel in science and engineering.

Bruce A. Wooley, the former chair of Stanford University's Electrical Engineering Department, has noted that Tehran's Sharif University of Science and Technology has one of the best undergraduate programs in electrical engineering in the world (Newsweek, 2010). Iran has an abundance of young talent and technological expertise: key ingredients in any tech boom.

In recent months, there have been a number of events working to take advantage of these rich resources. Cities across Iran have hosted Startup Weekends in which aspiring entrepreneurs and developers discuss projects and ideas for collaboration. The capital also played host to the second edition of the TEDx conference at the end of September 2014.

The popularity of such events was among the factors prompting Techcrunch editor Mike Butcher to observe that Iran "seems well on

its way to begin the process of joining the international tech startup community" (Butcher, 2014).

There is growing enthusiasm in the West as well. Last month, the first "Europe-Iran Forum" convened in London to discuss opportunities for investment in Iran, drawing large crowds and high-profile visitors, including former British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw (Hamsheir, 2014).

Not all observers are so sanguine. In a recent talk at an Iranian entrepreneurship conference at UC Berkeley, Yahya Tabesh of the Sharif University of Technology pointed out some of the obstacles to further development of Iran's nascent startup scene.

Among the issues Dr. Tabesh noted were an underdeveloped private sector, poor technological infrastructure and Iran's exclusion from the global economy (Tabesh, in Bridge, 2014). A consequent lack of venture capital from domestic or foreign sources has immensely complicated the process of securing funding for startup companies.

A Small Media report found that one of the primary structural issues affecting both the price and quality of internet access in Iran is a government monopoly on bandwidth. The state-owned Telecommunication Infrastructure Company (TIC) holds the exclusive right to sell bandwidth in the country (Small Media, 2014b).

The government's tight grip on internet infrastructure not only leaves little room for the private sector, but also results in exorbitantly high prices for consumers.

The cost of the internet in Iran is significantly higher than the fees paid by users in neighboring countries such as Turkey (Ibid). Moreover, demand for bandwidth far outstrips the available supply. In February and March of 2014, demand for bandwidth reached 10 terabits per second (Tbps), while available supply stood at a paltry .13 Tbps (Ibid).

This shortage not only exacerbates the issue of price, but also severely impairs internet quality. Internet speeds in Iran are so achingly slow that even president Rouhani has taken note, joking at a press conference:

> *If we want to download an article we must sit for hours, and sometimes we fall asleep.*
> Hassan Rouhani (in Haghighatnejad, 2014)

In addition to the high cost and low speed of the internet in Iran, government filtering presents another set of challenges to Iranian entrepreneurs. If the authorities deem any content on a startup's website to be in violation of the broadly worded Cyber Crime Law, they may completely block the platform upon which it is hosted.

As startups depend on reliable, fast and affordable internet access to function, these infrastructural issues erect considerable barriers to further development of the tech sector.

All of these barriers are significant, but Dr. Tabesh insists that the largest obstacle to the development of a startup scene is Iran's global economic exclusion as a result of Western sanctions. The economy and technology are global phenomena, he notes, and Iran cannot develop if it is isolated (Tabesh, in Bridge 2014, 2014).

As The Economist points out, "the overall effect of the sanction regime has been to make it very difficult for Iranian individuals, companies, banks and state institutions to interact with the outside world" (The Economist, 2014: 12).

The interim nuclear agreement reached in November 2013 offered limited sanctions relief, and some American companies have expressed interest in the Iranian market. However, the record fine of $8.8 billion imposed on French bank BNP Paribas for violating sanctions has made Western companies nervous about running afoul of American regulators (Ax et al., 2014). This atmosphere will make it difficult for Iranian startups to court foreign investment or expand beyond Iran's borders.

Closely related to the status of Iran's relationship with the outside world is the issue of "brain drain." According to an IMF study, Iran has one of the world's highest rates of youth emigration, with over 150,000 educated Iranians leaving the Islamic Republic each year (Esfandiari, 2004). The economic impact of this emigration has been devastating, with the World Bank estimating an annual loss of $50 billion in 2010 (in Khajehpour, 2014)

Iran can boast of having produced a number of hugely successful emigres, including Salar Kamangar, a senior executive of Google and ex-CEO of YouTube, who was born in Tehran in 1977. An active member of the Parsa Community Foundation, an organisation promoting Persian

arts and culture in the United States, Mr. Kamangar hasn't forgotten his roots. However, international sanctions prohibit the foundation from offering grants to most organizations inside Iran (Parsa Community Foundation, 2014) and there is no substantial evidence to suggest that successful Iranian expats are investing in startups back in Iran.

While there is considerable global interest in Iran's startup scene, there remain significant obstacles to its further development. Most pressing are Iran's significant internet infrastructural inadequacies, and its exclusion from the global economy. A potential nuclear deal with the P5+1 may result in the easing of sanctions and the emergence of a more favourable economic climate, but until then the sector will continue to face some difficult challenges. ◊

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