

The New Political Tools

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- Internet use in Iran continues to increase at a fast pace. The number of Internet users in Iran has grown from less than 1 million in 2000 to about 28 million, or 38 percent of the population, in 2009.
- The Persian blogosphere is considered one of the most active in the world. The number of active bloggers includes approximately 60,000 routinely updated blogs, according to the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University.
- The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is the arm of the state most involved in Internet control and filtering.
- The Iranian filtering system continues to strengthen and deepen. In addition to targeting “immoral” content on the Internet, independent and dissenting voices are filtered across a range of issues, including political reform, criticism of the government, reporting on human rights issues and minority and women’s rights.

Overview

Free speech in Iran is severely limited, and the media is predominantly state-controlled. Restrictions on free speech are enshrined in Iran’s constitution, which declares that, “The media should be used as a forum for healthy encounter of different ideas, but must strictly refrain from diffusion and propagation of destructive and anti-Islamic practices.” As a result, communication technology has liberated Iranian society from government restrictions on free speech. Going online has allowed Iranians to express their views. The so-called Green Movement and the broader opposition, in particular, have used new technologies to communicate with their fellow citizens inside as well as outside Iran.

The Internet was particularly critical for civil society in the months before the disputed June 12, 2009 presidential election, and the months shortly thereafter. Opposition activists relied on the Internet to organize activities, express their grievances with the state and expose the state security forces’ human rights violations. Civic activism had not been so pervasive since the time of the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Techno-savvy

Of all the countries in the Middle East and Persian Gulf, Iran is the nation with the greatest number of bloggers and an accelerating number of Internet users. Iranian society has become more politicized by adopting Internet-based technology as the primary instrument of dissent. There are tens of thousands of Persian bloggers, which

include those inside and outside Iran. More than one-third of the Iranian population, or 28 million people, used the Internet in 2009 – compared with less than 1 million in the year 2000, according to reports issued by the International Telecommunications Union.

Access to online media, which includes blogs, Facebook and discussion groups, has created for Iranians an alternative media that shapes public opinion and serves to counter the contrived political narrative advanced by the regime through the state-run media.

In order to deal with the expansive role of the Internet, the state has turned to Internet surveillance as the primary mechanism to maintain control over an increasingly restive society. In fact, aside from China, the Iranian state is deemed to have the most sophisticated technology among authoritarian regimes in blocking and strictly filtering the Internet, controlling social networking and targeting bloggers engaged in civil disobedience. Reporters Without Borders ranked Iran at the bottom of its World Press Freedom Index in 2007, behind repressive countries such as Burma and Cuba.

The state has far more resources to control and manipulate the Internet compared with civil society. Yet, Iranian activists' use of new media as a political weapon against the state is among the most sophisticated and savvy in the world. Facebook was one of the main tools for the opposition during the presidential campaign in the spring and summer of 2009 and shortly after the disputed June 2009 election, as were video exchange websites, such as YouTube.com.

Media history

Iranians' widespread use of new communication technologies is the second phase of a media revolution that began with the election of President Mohammad Khatami in 1997. During the early years of his presidency, a relatively free press flourished in Iran. Khatami believed that the media could be a main tool to transform Iran's authoritarian political system. As a former head of the ministry of culture and Islamic guidance, the government agency in charge of the press, Khatami understood the transformative nature of the media. When he was first elected president, hundreds of reformist newspapers and journals began publication, and a free press became the hallmark of his administration – and a way to disseminate his reformist ideas.

By 2000, however, the conservative political elites decided that a free press was too threatening to the Islamic Republic. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei sounded the warning bell on April 20, 2000 about an end to an independent press. He declared that the press had become "bases for the enemy." With that declaration, Iran's judiciary began closing journals and newspapers and imprisoning journalists. By 2003, the independent press had virtually disappeared.

The emergence of widespread Internet access and use in Iran converged with the end of a brief window of press freedom. For a newer generation of Iranians, freedom of expression through the Internet is less vulnerable to state controls than the press movement of the Khatami era. Thus, telecommunication technologies have ended the regime's monopoly on the media and created more democracy in communication.

Persian blogosphere

Iranians rely on blogs more than any other tool for social networking, particularly blogs used for political discourse. Even in a restrictive country such as Iran, blogs offer a rare opportunity for political discussion.

The widespread use of blogging is often cited as being primarily responsible for communicating grievances against the Iranian regime, but in fact this narrative is only part of the story. Social networking analysts at Harvard's Berkman Center place bloggers in four categories:

- Secular/reformist, which includes famous dissidents usually living outside Iran
- Conservative/religious, which includes bloggers supportive of the regime and the Islamic revolution
- Persian poetry and literature, which contribute to Persian poetry as an important form of cultural expression
- And mixed networks, which include discussions about sports and many other topics.

The secular/reformist bloggers have taken the lead in ongoing discussions about Iranian politics, the separation of religion and state in Iran and current affairs in the world. "The Iranian blogosphere remains a viable arena of political contestation and a forum of viewpoints challenging the ruling ideology of the Islamic Republic," according to the Berkman Center.

The secular oriented bloggers include a high percentage of women. Gender is an interesting and notable feature of the Persian blogosphere, as bloggers in other parts of the world tend to be men.

Another striking characteristic among the secular and reformist bloggers is that they tend to use their real names, which makes them vulnerable to retaliation from Iranian authorities. But an undetermined number of blogs are written outside Iran. Readers inside Iran still have access to those blogs written outside, which is an important way bloggers are able to evade any action from the authorities who block blogs that are critical of the regime.

State censorship

The regime's technical filtering and censorship of the Internet is one of the most extensive in the world. Strategies to gain control of the Internet were well underway in 2001, even though Internet use was still at a minimum. A series of decrees were passed in 2001 by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution that required Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to employ filtering systems. In 2002, a Committee in Charge of Determining Unauthorized Sites was established.

In 2009, Iran required all private ISPs that offer Internet connections to the public to connect through the state-owned Telecommunications Company of Iran. This requirement means that all Internet activity must pass through one gateway, which the government controls. Through this system, the state conducts Internet surveillance. State security services can interrupt and monitor online networks, monitor discussions about planned protests and other forms of civil disobedience, and target the names and locations of activists.

Since the June election in 2009, state authorities have slowed the Internet's speed significantly to 56 KB, according to a report issued in March 2010 by Reporters Without Borders. The slow speed has dramatically hampered the opposition movement's ability to mobilize demonstrators in as large numbers as it did shortly after the June election, when an estimated 3 million Iranians protested on the streets of Tehran.

Iran has produced technology for identifying and blocking web sites considered politically harmful. Like China, Iran is becoming less reliant on Western sources by producing this technology domestically. This achievement has been important for the regime, which considers using Western technology for the Internet a weakness. Domestically produced technology is used for filtering, for searching the Internet for tracking keywords and links to banned websites, and for tracking material considered to be un-Islamic.

Before the events on February 11, 2010, marking the thirty-first anniversary of the Islamic revolution, the Iranian authorities slowed Internet service in Iran, shut down text messaging services and blocked Google and Gmail. Google confirmed a drop in traffic during this period. Blocking Facebook is now a permanent strategy employed before demonstrations.

Revolutionary Guards' role

In September 2009, a firm called the Mobin Trust Consortium, which was partially owned by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), bought 51 percent of shares in the Telecommunications Company of Iran, for an estimated \$8 billion. This was considered the largest sale in the history of Iran's stock exchange.

The IRGC then established entire hubs of technology blockades with foreign expertise. In 2009, the Revolutionary Guards established a state-sanctioned Cyber

Defense Command, the most significant action by the state to counter online political activism. This institution is responsible for investigating so-called cyber crimes, which are generally allegations against Internet users who are activists or journalists. The IRGC, with its vast political influence, has also managed to get laws passed that make distributing anti-filtering technology, or introducing the public to methods of bypassing censorship, illegal.

In March 2010, the office of Tehran's General and Revolutionary Courts announced that 30 individuals suspected of being involved in organized cyber wars were arrested after a series of complicated intelligence operations in communications technology. This move followed a wave of attacks against anti-government websites and blogs by a group called Iran's Cyber Army, which are renegade pro-regime activists.

Factoids

- All Internet Service Providers in Iran are routed through a central hub owned by a company under the command of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards. This allows the government to monitor, filter, slow or shut off all Internet in the country.
- The IRGC formed a "Cyber Defense Command" in 2009, which is responsible for monitoring potentially subversive Internet activity.
- Monitoring and filtering the Internet is enshrined through law, which mandates that all users' browsing data must be stored for three months.
- Methods of the government's Internet control and monitoring include technical filtering of the Internet to prevent access to specific types of information by identifying specific keywords, domain names and web addresses deemed to be subversive; intercepting email to identify and monitor dissidents; and hacking blogs and websites, which can disrupt and shutdown sites.

The future

- Internet use continues to increase annually in Iran, despite government restrictions.
- Iranian activists outside the country are working to encourage technology firms and governments to make available advanced tools to counter state censorship.
- These tools include a hardened satellite to host Iranian channels. This would enable effective Persian news services, such as the BBC Persian Service and Voice of America, to escape the authorities' routine jamming efforts.
- Activists are also working to facilitate the provision of high-speed Internet. Because the regime deliberately slows the Internet, making alternative satellites available - aside from those used by the regime - could allow Iranians to have access to high-speed Internet.

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