**Iran: A Friction between State Ideology and Network Society**

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| PULL QUOTES  President Rouhani: ‘Supporters of internet filtering should explain whether they've successfully restricted access to information? Which important piece of news has filtering been able to black out in recent years?’  DATA BOX  75 million: total population  23 million: estimated number of internet users  69 %: percentage of internet users who use circumvention tools  330,000: number of Twitter followers for President Rouhani, despite Twitter being banned in Iran  IMAGES  A government notice for blocked websites |

The Iranian movie *Bullet Proof* (dir. Mostafa Kiayee, 2012) depicts the rise of audio-visual black markets after the 1979 Islamic revolution. Losing his music store during Islamization, our protagonist Salim starts to sell unauthorized products on the black market. In one scene, Salim leaves his house with a bag full of unauthorized audio cassette tapes. At a street stall, a chubby boy is calling out ‘New Cassette!’, ‘New Cassette!’, but he changes his words to ‘New Ahangaran![[1]](#footnote-1)’ when an Islamist militiaman is passing. Salim meets his business partner in a public park to deliver the bag, but the Revolutionary Guard officers chase them and arrest his partner; Salim manages to run away. Twenty years later, we see Salim has upgraded his devices to CDs and DVDs instead of audio cassettes. He is also negotiating with a partner to enter into an emerging market: satellite dishes.

The movie portrays the black market keeping pace with technological changes, from audio and video cassettes in the 1980s to DVDs and satellite television in the 2000s. Soon after the 1979 Islamic revolution, the clerical rulers imposed Islamic principles on almost all social and political institutions, from marriage, divorce and penal codes to banking and commerce. The state attempted not only to transform social and political structures, but also to control people’s moral attitudes. Books, newspapers, magazines, music, and movies were subjected to extensive regulation and censorship. The state-owned television and radio dominated the media landscape in the post-revolutionary era.

The new regime presented its restrictive policies as defending Islam and Iranian national interests against western ‘cultural invasion’ and ‘soft war’. Underlying these representations were the authorities’ concerns about the increasing secularization of society and the growing alienation of youth from the state. Unwilling to acknowledge the ineffectiveness of forceful Islamization, the hardliners have accused the western media of subverting Islamic values and threatening the state’s political legitimacy.

The black market of CDs and DVDs is still alive. Around Enqelab square in Tehran, many video dealers sell uncensored Hollywood movies. At times the police raid the area and confiscate the DVDs. Nevertheless, the internet and satellite television have largely replaced such markets. Reducing the regime’s grip on information flow, new communication technologies have provided Iranians with unprecedented access to global news, information, and images. Feeling gravely threatened, the government has invested vast sums of money, instituted several councils and bodies, and devised many policies, laws and regulations to control and curb cross-border information flow. In what follows, we describe the methods employed by the government to restrict citizens’ access to global media content and those employed by citizens to circumvent censorship – from illegal satellite dishes to VPNs, proxies and peer-to-peer networking. In particular, we focus on the internet and satellite television, the technologies that have generated significant political and cultural conflicts in Iran and created video cultures outside official channels.

**Satellite Television: a New Video Culture**

To understand Internet circumvention in Iran, we must take a step back to consider an earlier kind of unauthorised media. Since the 1990s, foreign-based Persian-language satellite channels have mushroomed, posing a serious challenge to the regime’s monopoly over broadcast media. The satellite television networks offer all sorts of programs, ranging from news, commentary and politics to music, entertainment and soap operas. The state has banned satellite television ‘to protect the country’s cultural borders and the foundations of family’ against immoral content. The law bans selling, buying, installing, and using satellite television equipment such as dishes and receivers. Nevertheless, the majority of Iranians easily access these channels by installing dishes on rooftops and balconies. The Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Ali Jannati, reported that 71 per cent of people in Tehran watch satellite TV.[[2]](#footnote-2) Although this figure is likely to be inflated, watching satellite TV has no doubt become a widespread practice among city dwellers.

The authorities have used various methods of crackdown. At times, the police raid buildings and confiscate dishes. They have used helicopters to scan rooftops and cranes to seize dishes from balconies. Police have abseiled down the sides of tall buildings in search of dishes. These methods have largely been futile because the dishes have soon reappeared on rooftops. These familiar cat-and-mouse games have been memorably depicted in Iranian movies such as Parisa Bakhtavar’s *Tambourine* and Abdolreza Kahani’s *Absolute Rest*.

The state has also employed more sophisticated and effective methods such as satellite jamming. Powerful noise signals are sent directly to satellites such as HotBird and Eutelsat, mixing frequencies and jamming their signals. Home viewers then see scrambled images on screen. BBC Persian and Voice of America (VoA) have been the typical targets. Iran has never acknowledged using such methods, but international organizations have claimed that the jamming signals are sent from within Iran. The UN telecommunications body (ITU) and the European Union have called on the Iranian government to stop satellite jamming and ‘electronic interference’. It is also widely believed that the Revolutionary Guard runs the jamming system. Not surprisingly, the regime uses this method more actively at times of political upheaval and during elections.

Despite the attempts outlined above, Iranians have integrated satellite television into their daily lives. Political channels such as BBC Persian and Voice of America (VoA) continue to influence public opinion by highlighting and disseminating news, images, videos and information that the state tries to suppress. Persian-language entertainment channels such as Manoto have attracted large audience by running western-style talent shows and competitions. Other channels such as GEM TV and Farsi One have attracted viewers by screening popular movies and soap operas. None of the above mentioned methods have proved effective in discouraging ordinary people from watching satellite TV. At times of political upheaval, the state has been relatively successful in jamming some political channels; at other times, however, satellite channels have managed to reach out to viewers and help create a video culture very different from the ideologically-fuelled one promoted by the state television.

**A *Halal* Internet**

Statistics on the number of Iranian internet users are inconsistent. While the Iranian government counts about 40 million internet users out of a population of 75 million, the World Bank estimates the number to be around 23 million[[3]](#footnote-3). The Iranian Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Ali Jannati, reported that 9.5 million Iranians use Viber and 4 to 5 million use Facebook[[4]](#footnote-4). Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights considers everyone entitled ‘to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers’, Iran, which is a signatory, has blocked social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube, political dissidents’ blogs and websites, and international news websites.

The London-based advocacy group Small Media reports a threefold strategy employed by the government to control the internet. Firstly, Authorities aim to ‘prevent’ users from accessing the perceived threatening content through keyword filtering, URL blacklisting, and broadband speed limitations. For example, users who attempt to access YouTube see the following image, which reads: ‘Access to the requested website is not possible’, and introduces a list of miscellaneous websites. Next, they exploit technology to ‘intercept’ those who have managed to get around censorship through monitoring, tracking and blocking internet traffic. Lastly, internet activists and developers are arrested and connections are throttled during political turmoils.[[5]](#footnote-5)



Fig. 1: Iranian internet users see this government notice when trying to access blocked websites. It reads: “Access to the requested website is not possible. Please click here to access reports and complaints.”

Taking office as President in 2013, Hassan Rouhani criticized internet censorship, raising hopes for reducing internet barriers (to be discussed further below). However, he faced fierce opposition from conservative rivals. In 2014, as soon as the ICT ministry issued 3G and 4G licenses to two mobile-phone operators, a leading cleric called on the government to revoke them because ‘dirty pictures and clips’ could poison young minds.[[6]](#footnote-6) Comparing these technologies to ‘unsanitary and muddy water’, and worrying about ‘all sorts of polluted films without any filtering’, he declared that ‘3G mobile communication services and higher are against Sharia [Islamic law] and moral and human norms’.

Perhaps Iran’s most ambitious plan for extending its control over the internet has been the launching of a “walled-off” national internet. The network will connect government ministries, universities, banks, healthcare, tax systems, and other state institutions through local servers. Although users will benefit from higher speed and better cyber-security, many are concerned that the government’s main motive is to consolidate its control over the internet. In response to such concerns, Iran’s ICT minister, Mahmoud Vaezi, claimed that the national internet ‘is not in competition with the Internet’ and that ‘if users cannot find the data that they are looking for on the national internet, then they will be able to access the Internet to search for it, instead’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Put it simply, the government aims to obtain the capacity of switching off the internet without disrupting public services, banks, and corporations. It is, however, unlikely that the government could completely detach Iran from the global internet; the more likely outcome would be a ‘dual-internet structure’ like that currently used in some other authoritarian countries.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Work on the national internet project started in 2005, and has progressed slowly since then. In recent years, at least two events caused the conservative authorities to be more determined to carry the project through. In the aftermath of the 2009 presidential election, where millions of Iranians took to the streets to protest against Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s disputed victory, the regime experienced an unprecedented challenge to official media control. During rallies, protesters used their mobile phones to take pictures and video footage of police brutality and violence, posting them on social media. Global news coverage of the regime’s brutal crackdown led to the condemnation of the regime by many international human rights organizations and governments. The second alarming event was the Stuxnet attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities in 2010, where the country’s prized nuclear arsenal was overtaken by a computer virus, thus highlighting the perceived threat posed by foreign, unauthorised digital technologies to the Iranian state.

**Internet Circumvention Tools**

Despite government restrictions, users often find ways to get around internet censorship. In a survey conducted by Iran’s Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sport, 69 per cent of respondents said they use anti-filtering software.[[9]](#footnote-9) Ironically, users can even buy VPNs through official online payment gateways, such as PardakhtNet! Given how easily available these VPN services are, it is widely believed that segments of the ruling establishment (including elements within the Revolutionary Guard) facilitate the trade to earn money.[[10]](#footnote-10) In this environment, critics rightly question the effectiveness of numerous laws, policies, and regulations in place to control internet access. Criticizing his conservative opponents, the moderate president Hassan Rouhani asked: ‘Supporters of internet filtering should explain whether they've successfully restricted access to information? Which important piece of news has filtering been able to black out in recent years?’ He continued: ‘Filtering has not even stopped people from accessing unethical [pornographic] websites. Widespread online filtering will only increase distrust between the people and the state’[[11]](#footnote-11).

Users take advantage of numerous tools to get around censorship. A Freedom House survey revealed that VPNs, Google (Reader, Translation, Cache), and Your Freedom are the most popular circumvention tools in Iran. The survey listed the most popular tools in Iran as the following: Dynaweb, Freegate, Freenet, Garden GTunnel, Google, Gpass, HotspotShield, JAP, Proxy, Psiphon, Tor, Ultrasurf, Your Freedom, and VPN.[[12]](#footnote-12) Filtershekanha (means ‘Filter breakers’) is an email list with over 100,000 subscribers through which information about VPNs is distributed among users. Another survey of 423 users, conducted by Small Media, found that Hotspot Shield, Psiphon, and Kerio are favored by users.[[13]](#footnote-13) Other surveys have also reported the widespread use of the web proxy service Hotspot Shield and Psiphon3, a peer-to-peer VPN app for Android and Windows.[[14]](#footnote-14) As of 2013, Psiphon claimed to have 700,000 to 900,000 daily unique users in Iran. This number is now believed to have surpassed one million[[15]](#footnote-15).

Small Media reports that the terrain of Internet circumvention is increasingly shifting to mobile, with the most popular tools having easy-to-use mobile-enabled interfaces now. It also points out that, TOR, despite its strong privacy protection, is not very popular among Iranians partly because it has been constantly attacked by the government. Overall, Iranians seem to care more about ease of access than security. There are also anti-filtering tools that are unique to Iran. For example, Simurgh is ‘Iranian stand-alone proxy software’ which has been widely used since 2009; due to its small size (1 MB), users with low speed connection can download it easily. It is also free. This software has been recently used by Syrian dissidents.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**The Political Context of Circumvention**

Despite common perceptions, most Iranians do not go online specifically in search of ‘forbidden’ political material; rather they wish to ‘live their normal lives’ by accessing social media such as Telegram, Viber, Facebook and the like to communicate with their family members and friends. They share photos, music videos, comedies, shows, and educational material within their social circles; they look for entertainment, search for all sorts of information and read news online. A question that naturally arises is: why then are authorities so sensitive about the free internet? The answer has to do with the ideological nature of the Iranian state.

The clerics and conservative rulers censor the internet for the same reason that they have put in place extremely restrictive measures to uphold Islamic principles and moral standards in public spaces. They are concerned that freedom will inevitably give rise to western lifestyles, mixing with the opposite sex and promiscuity. Despite extensive regulation, conservatives are constantly complaining about the growing un-Islamic practices in society. The same concerns lead them to oppose the unfettered internet. In their view, the free internet would weaken their grip over cultural production and consumption. In a country where interactions between young men and women are severely controlled, it is not surprising that the authorities are worried about online communication. The political power of religion in Iran does not allow for a cultural sphere separate from politics.

Finally, it is worth noting an important difference between Iran and other cases discussed in this book. Iranians struggle with filtering as much as internet speed. Authorities have kept the speed extremely slow as a deliberate method to frustrate users and discourage them from downloading photos and videos. Based on nationwide regulations, ISPs are permitted to provide speed connection only up to 128 kbps to home users, which is 50 times slower than the internet speed in the US[[17]](#footnote-17). Academics and professionals could receive higher speed up to 512 kbps and in special circumstances up to 2 mbps. As mentioned earlier, the government attempt at providing higher speed 3G and 4G licences to mobile operators was strongly opposed by Parliament and influential clerics. Conservatives continue to obstruct any attempt at raising internet speed until the national internet comes into full operation. They call the national internet a ‘Halal’ internet, an expression that reveals their concerns about the cultural impact of the free internet and the potential rise of a video culture that could jeopardise their cherished values.

**Future Trends**

The Islamic Republic of Iran has struggled to maintain and strengthen cultural sovereignty within its borders. By establishing numerous cultural, political, and legal institutions, the regime has invested enormously in constructing and imposing Islamic identity on all spheres of social life. The state has set itself the ambitious task not only of restructuring the entire society on the basis of Islamic values, but also of controlling and guiding people’s thoughts and morality. The policies, however, have not been executed very effectively and consistently. Constitutionally, Iranians vote in the government through elections, and despite all state restrictions, at times people have defeated the ruling conservatives. President Khatami (1997-2005) campaigned for social and political freedom and sought constructive engagement with the West, policies that were strongly resisted by hardliners. In 2013, Hassan Rouhani won the presidential election after campaigning on moderate foreign and domestic policies. Many hoped that his government would reduce internet barriers and relax ultraconservative regulation of culture and politics.

President Rouhani has symbolically and rhetorically opposed state censorship. While Twitter is blocked in Iran, Rouhani’s Twitter account has over 330,000 followers. Zarif, the foreign minister, actively tweets about Iran’s foreign policy issues. Rouhani has called internet filtering ‘futile’, saying: ‘We cannot close the gates of the world to our young generation’[[18]](#footnote-18). Despite these positive signs, as far as media censorship is concerned, Rouhani’s discretion is limited. The decision-making bodies are supra-governmental and mostly controlled by the conservatives. The Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC), which is the highest state organization responsible for devising cyber policies, works under the supreme leader’s directive. Given these limitations, a radical and thoroughgoing change would be unlikely to happen. At best, Rouhani’s policies will bring about slow and incremental changes in the coming years.

The friction between state policies and social reality in Iran offers an intriguing case for media analysts. Technological changes have provided a good opportunity for ordinary citizens to circumvent barriers and access global media content. On the other hand, the state has sophisticated its methods and technologies to maintain its dominance over information flows. Iranian moderate politicians feel the state will ultimately lose this game. The Culture and Islamic Guidance minister, Ali Jannati, compared the current prohibition of satellite television and social media to the banning of video cassettes in the 1980s, as portrayed in the movie Bullet Proof. Calling such policies ‘ridiculous’, he said: ‘Maybe in five years we will laugh at today’s actions’.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, given that the Iranian Islamic state has defined its identity in opposition to western culture and imperial powers, it will continue to actively resist pressure from the western-controlled global media in order to maintain the existing media communication boundaries in the foreseeable future.

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