

An open letter addressed President-elect Hassan Rouhani the day after his victory in the Iranian presidential race was announced. The letter asked the future president of Iran to address the many troubles Iranian Internet users have to face on a daily basis. The more than 5,000 Iranians who signed the letter, about 90% of whom stated that they are based inside Iran, reminded Dr. Rouhani that they used the Internet to facilitate his passage to the office of the President of Iran.

An Open Letter to the Future President of Iran

Iranian Internet users describe “better Internet” in an open letter to Dr. Hassan Rouhani, the President-elect of Iran.

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An Open Letter to the President-elect

Amid widespread anticipations of election irregularities and disappointment on the June 14th presidential election in Iran, the candidate endorsed by reformists, Hassan Rouhani, won the election. Two days later, an open letter (posted below in English and Persian) to him was posted online, requesting that the state of the Internet in Iran be improved.

جناب آقای دکتر حسن روحانی، ریاست جمهور منتخب مردم ایران،

انتخاب شما به این مقام مهم را تبریک می‌گوییم. شادمانی دوستان ما در شهرهای مختلف ایران و کشورهای دیگر به ما نشان می‌دهد که ایرانیان زیادی به شما امید بسته‌اند که زندگی بهتری برای آن‌ها فراهم کنید.

"Of course the Internet is not going to be the reason why we may consider voting for you in 2017. It is going to be only one of the reasons for us. We have higher hopes after your election."

- From Tehran, Iran

ما، کاربران شبکه‌های اجتماعی اینترنتی و وبلاگ‌نویسان، از حضور خود در فضای مجازی برای تشویق دیگران به شرکت در انتخابات و رای دادن به شما استفاده کردیم. برخی از ما ساکن شهرهای مختلف ایران هستیم و برخی دیگر ساکن کشورهای جز ایران. مستقل از موقعیت جغرافیایی، ما از اینترنت استفاده کردیم تا به دیگر ایرانیانی که به هر دلیل تمایلی به شرکت در این انتخابات نداشتند نشان دهیم که امید به آینده‌ای بهتر تنها از طریق مشارکت در فرایندهای سیاسی حاصل می‌شود.

ما دیدیم که شما هم از اینترنت برای ارتباط با ایرانیان استفاده کردید. حضور شما در توییتر و شبکه‌های مجازی دیگر به ما نشان داد که شما هم از اهمیت اینترنت در زندگی در این روزگار مطلع هستید.

جناب آقای روحانی! وضعیت اینترنت در ایران به هیچ وجه مناسب نیست. اینترنت در ایران کند است و نظام فیلترینگ افراد را از دسترسی به اطلاعات منع می‌کند. فعالیت اقتصادی مبتنی بر اینترنت در ایران بسیار پرخطر است. اطمینان داریم که مشاورین شما با شما درباره‌ی این موضوعات صحبت کرده‌اند.

اینترنت همانند هر موجودیت دیگر نیازمند سامان‌دهی و نظام‌بخشی است. ما از شما می‌خواهیم ایجاد سازوکار مناسبی برای مدیریت اینترنت را در اولویت برنامه‌های خود قرار دهید. به نظر ما، اینترنت در ایران می‌تواند با سرعت‌های بسیاری بالاتری عرضه شود. ما معتقدیم مدیریت اینترنت باید توسط نهادهایی انجام شود که با رای مردم انتخاب شده‌اند و سازوکار این ساختار باید شفاف بوده و در دسترس شهروندان باشد. ما از شما می‌خواهیم که به‌عنوان منتخب بیش از نیمی از رای‌دهندگان، با دستگاه‌های مرتبط برای تعریف دقیق‌تر مصادیق عمل مجرمانه در اینترنت وارد مذاکره شوید.

جناب آقای روحانی! ما در اینترنتی که سرعت آن در معیارهای امروز غیرقابل پذیرش است و با استفاده از شبکه‌های اجتماعی‌ای که حضور در آن‌ها منع شده است، ایرانیان را به شرکت در حیات سیاسی خود ترغیب کردیم. ما از شما می‌خواهیم که شرایطی را فراهم آورید که در سال ۱۳۹۶ قادر باشیم و انگیزه‌ای برای دعوت دوباره‌ی ایرانیان به ریختن رای خود به نام شما در صندوق‌های رای داشته باشیم.

فهرست امضاکنندگان را اینجا ببینید - <http://goo.gl/yqM8M>

نامه را از این نشانی هم خوان (share) کنید <http://goo.gl/aWgJX> :

Dr. Hassan Rouhani, the president-elect of the people of Iran,¹

We congratulate your victory in the race for this important position. The happiness of our friends in different cities of Iran and other countries indicates to us that many Iranians are now looking to you in the hope that you will give them the opportunity to have a better life.

We are users of different social networks and we used our presence in cyberspace in order to encourage others to participate in the election and to vote for you. Some of us live in different cities in Iran and some of us are based outside Iran. Independent of our geographic location, we used the Internet to show other Iranians, some of whom for different reasons did not intend to participate in the election, that hope for a better future is only possible when we participate in the political process.

We observed that you used the Internet in order to communicate to the Iranian public. Your presence on Twitter and other social networks indicated to us that you are aware of the significant role the Internet plays in our lives in this time and age.

Mr. Rouhani! The situation with the Internet is not acceptable in Iran. Internet connections are slow and the filtering regime stops people from accessing information. Internet-based commerce is very risky in Iran. We are confident that your aides have talked to you about these issues.

Internet, like any other entity, requires governance and order. We ask you to give priority to establishing an appropriate Internet governance regime in Iran. In our opinion, Internet can be provided at higher speeds in Iran, and we believe that Internet must be governed by entities which are elected by people's votes and that the operations of these entities must be transparent to citizens. We ask you, as the candidate of choice of more than half of the electorate, to begin conversations with the related state organizations and to provide a more accurate definition of legal activity in cyberspace.

Mr. Rouhani! We used an Internet with connection speeds which are unacceptable by today's standards, and we operated on social networks, the use of which is banned in Iran, and we encouraged Iranians to participate in the political process which affects their lives. We ask you work to provide conditions which will allow us both the means and the the impetus to encourage Iranians to vote for you again in 2017.

List of signatures - <http://goo.gl/yqM8M>

Share this letter from this address - <http://goo.gl/aWgJX>

¹ Several people hinted on Facebook and Google+ that this is the first time in the past eight years that they are using the two terms "President" and "people of Iran" comfortably in one sentence. "The term people's President just sounds great" one person noted on Google+.

Asking Iranians to Sign the Open Letter

The letter was composed as a form in Google Docs and was linked to a spreadsheet on which individuals were asked to provide a name (choices were: first and last name, user name, or virtual identity) and identify the location where they were based. Also, the participants were invited to give an answer to the question “How do you define a better Internet?” No sign-in was required. No private information other than what the participants decided to share was recorded. The letter was accessible to everyone with the link and the list of signatures was shared publicly, regardless of whether they had signed the form.² The link to the letter was initially disseminated on Twitter,³ and was subsequently retweeted by 68 people. The letter was also shared on Facebook,⁴ which was shared 51 times, and posted⁵ on Google+ and reshared by more than 29 people.⁶ Several mainstream Persian media sources, including BBC Persian and Radio Farda,⁷ covered the open letter and it was featured on several Persian blogs.⁸

“Mr Rouhani, you talk about pride. Please do something so that Iranians do not find themselves at the mercy of the American government to give them this or that mechanism to access the web.”

- From Tehran, Iran

The first signature appeared 4 minutes after the letter was published, and during the seven day period, it was signed by 5,759 individuals.⁹

“Mr. President! It is embarrassing that after Yahoo! and Google, one of the most visited pages is the Iranian “Access Prohibited” page.”

- From Mashhad, Iran

Analysis of the Responses

The data file was manually reviewed and responses to the location question were categorized as “Tehran,” “Iran, (other than Tehran),” and “Other Countries.” Figure 1 shows that 38.0% of respondents being based in Tehran and 50.5% identified other cities and provinces (in total, 88.5% of the participants stated that they are

² <http://goo.gl/>

³ Distributed initially on the Twitter account <https://twitter.com/Kamangir> at 9:47 AM EDT. The tweet read, “Open letter to the elected president of the Iranian people regarding the situation with the Internet in Iran. Sign and retweet please.” At the time of the Tweet, the account had 5,500+ followers. The letter was accessible until June 23, 2013 at 9:47 am.

<https://twitter.com/Kamangir/status/346262869517692928>

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151410478686292> (On the Facebook profile <https://www.facebook.com/abadpour>, 2,200+ followers)

⁵ <https://plus.google.com/photos/110918257830787056989/albums/posts/5890085100060293586?pid=5890085100060293586&oid=110918257830787056989> On the Google+ profile <https://plus.google.com/u/0/110918257830787056989/posts>, 10,000+ followers.

⁶ Reshares of the letter were shared by many users, including one reference to the letter, <https://plus.google.com/u/0/115571780611702365186/posts/1wvbW73Arkt>, which was shared by 109 people. At the time of this writing, a search in Google on the title of the letter returns 64,700 results, many on different social networks as well as blogs, forums, and websites.

⁷ http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f35_internet_filtering_petition_rouhani/25018859.html

⁸ Including Jadi’s well-known blog “Free Keyboard” - <http://jadi.net/2013/06/naame-be-rohani-dar-morede-internet/>

⁹ The shortened link to the letter was accessed 14,320 times. Goo.gl statistics indicates that 2,540 of the attempts were tracked to Iran-based IP addresses. The letter was also accessed 3,618 times from the United States. The link to the list of the signatures was accessed 10,132 times. We emphasize that the letter was often shared through its direct Google Docs link. Also, many of the references to the letter on Google+ used the direct embedding of the contents. Hence, the statistics of Google URL Shortener only shows its own share of the traffic.

based in Iran), with 10.5% answering that they are based in other countries, and less than 1% provided invalid responses to this question (examples included individuals filling in their last name or random character sequences).

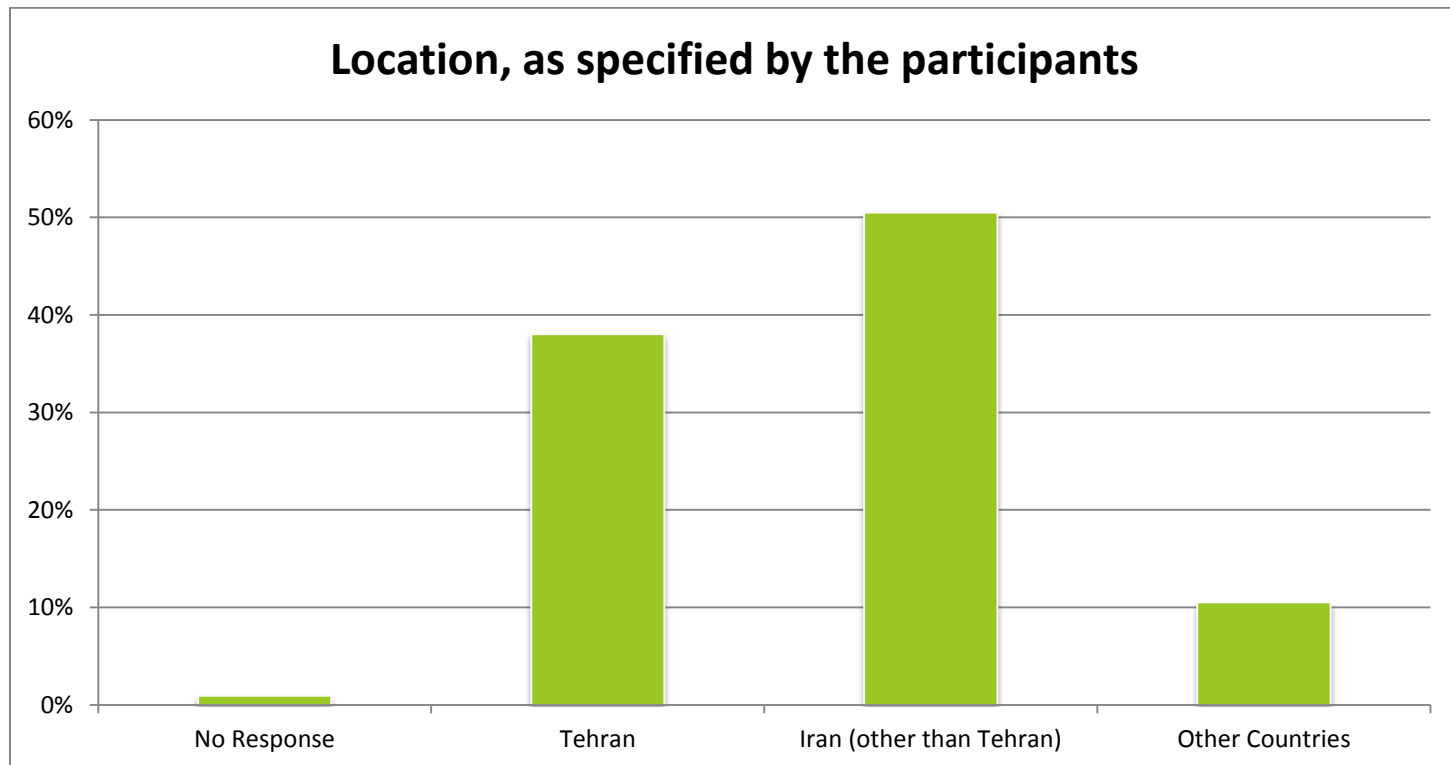


Figure 1 - Location, as specified by the participants

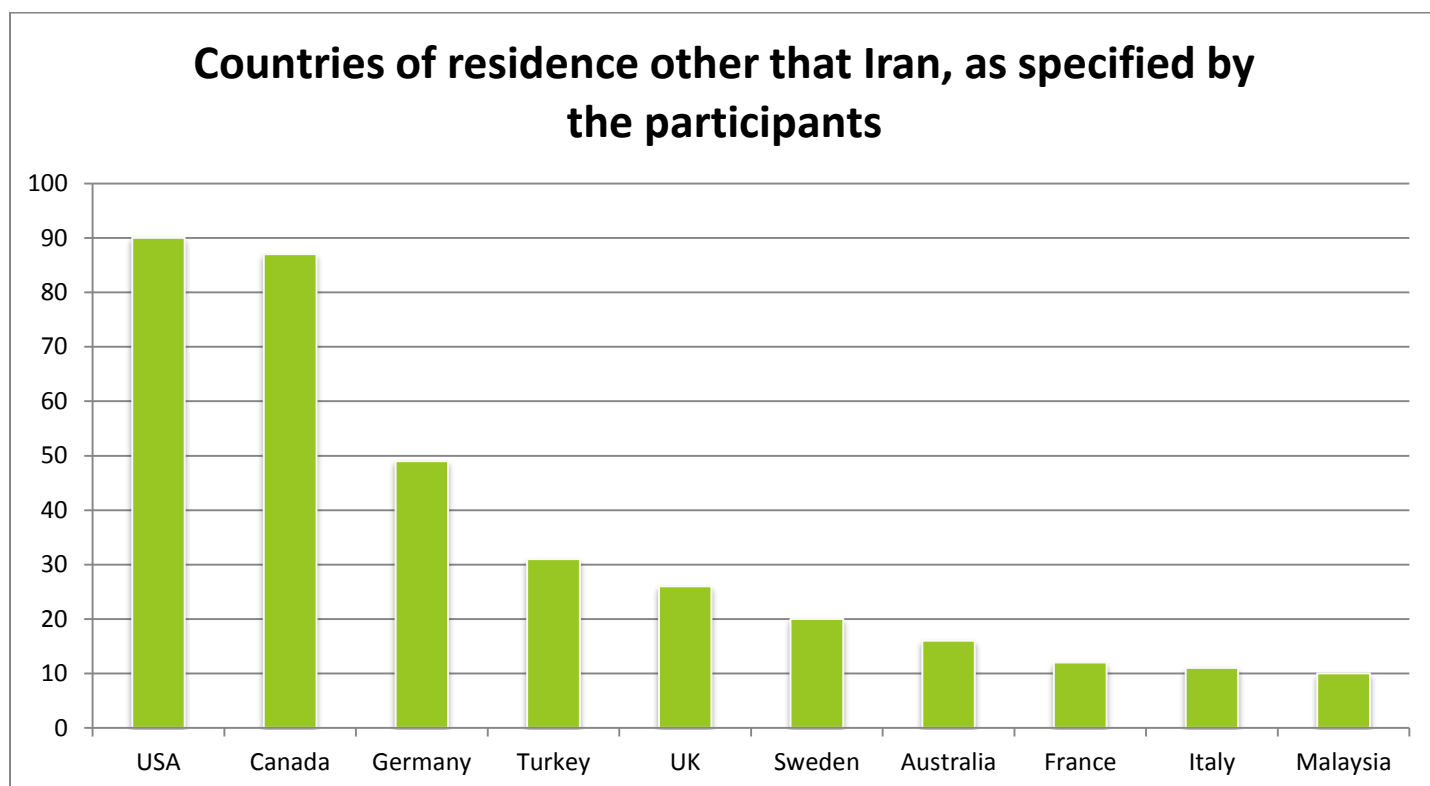


Figure 2 – Countries of residence other than Iran, as specified by the participants

A majority of respondents (61.2%) answered the “Better Internet” question. Wordle¹⁰ was used to identify the frequency of certain words in the responses to what improvements to the Internet in Iran respondents wanted.¹¹ Key words that appeared in more than 5% of the responses (288 responses) were added to a list and other words which were found to be mentioned in multiple responses were recorded as well.

In total, 36 character strings in Persian were selected. These keywords identified the common words, or roots of the words, used by the participants when they suggested that aspects of the Internet in Iran needed to be improved. For example, the character string محدود (limited) was selected because it was used by the participants in the following forms: محدودیت (limitation), نامحدود (unlimited), and محدودسازی (limitation). These keywords were then assigned to the seven categories listed below.¹² These categories are adopted from a previous study of archetypes of Iranian Internet users.¹³

“Mr. Rouhani, I did not vote for you. I am not going to vote for you in a hundred years, because I fundamentally do not acknowledge the current political regime. Nevertheless, please do something about the Internet.”

- From Tehran, Iran

1. **Access/Filtering/Reliability** – Access to the Internet to be facilitated, both in terms of geographical coverage of high-speed Internet access and in terms of groups in the society who have access. Filtering regime needs to be reviewed. Disruptions should be mitigated and eliminated. Prosecution of individuals for what they do on the web to be reviewed.
2. **Content** – Domestically-produced, Persian-language content on the web to be facilitated.
3. **Culture** – A better online culture is needed. Individuals should know their rights and responsibilities while on the web in order to limit spam, abuse, malicious activity, divisive partisanship, etc and similar ‘anti-social’ online activities and speech. The norms for acceptable behaviour on the web need to be revisited in order to allow for the web to function properly towards facilitating community-building and social and political activism.
4. **Price** – Internet has to be more affordable.
5. **Sanctions** – External sanctions hurt Iranian Internet users. The limitations imposed by sanctions need to be removed or modified.

“Internet has to be way less expensive than it is now in order for it to have an impact on all groups in society.”

- From Iran

¹⁰ <http://www.wordle.net/>

¹¹ Analysis of the responses to the “Better Internet” question found that less than 2% were in non-Persian characters. These responses were ignored.

¹² 84.8% of the non-blank responses contained at least one of the keywords and were assigned to at least one of the seven categories. Non-blank responses which did not contain any of the keywords were classified as “Other”.

¹³ Arash Abadpour and Collin Anderson, “Fights, Adapts, Accepts: Archetypes of Iranian Internet Use”, Iran Media Program and Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, March 2013, accessible at <http://www.iranmediaresearch.org/en/research/pdf/1287> - This work is referred to as the “Archetype Report” in this document.

6. **Security** – There are significant questions regarding the treatment of user security and privacy when data is en route within the state-controlled backbone of the Internet in Iran. An accountable and elected body to be established in order to handle Internet governance is needed. Individuals need to be more aware of and cautious about their own privacy and security on the web.

7. **Speed** – Internet connections must be faster.

“Internet needs to be Internet, or it is going to be #filternet!”
- From Esfahan, Iran

The practical challenge in this work, compared to the Archetype Report, was that here the coding of the responses utilized machine-based search for a list of keywords on a large dataset (5000+ records, many multiple sentences). In contrast, the Archetype Report had a much smaller sample size and analysis of individual responses was coded manually.

In this dataset, the same word, for example دسترسی (access), was utilized by the participants in order to refer to different concepts. Responses, for example, talked about ‘access’ in the following ways:

- دسترسی به اینترنت برای همه‌ی گروه‌های جامعه لازم است – It is important that all groups in the society have access to the Internet – **Access**
- این قابل قبول نیست که وبسایت‌ها بسیاری اوقات در دسترس نیستند – It is not acceptable that many websites are not accessible – **Filtering**
- مهم است که وقتی احتیاج داریم متوجه نشویم که اینترنت از دسترسی خارج شده‌است – It is important that we do not find that Internet is not accessible at the exact moment when we need it - **Reliability**

“You may think that Internet is a luxury, something that is desired by the wealthy. However, it is a fact that access to high-speed Internet has a direct relationship to education levels and the economy in any society. I am not exaggerating when I say that the most important reason why I left Iran was to be able to have access to free and fast Internet, which I need for my research.”

- From Canada

Therefore, based on the limitations of the method utilized in the analysis of this data, it was imperative to combine categories of responses in terms of the correlation between the keywords applicable to them. We realize that this decision limits the granularity of the data extracted from the responses.

Of the categorized responses, 84.7% referenced Access/Filtering/Reliability and 82.0% addressed Speed. 24.3% of the categorized responses discussed Price and 8.77% referred to Security concerns¹⁴. Content and Culture were referenced by between 2-3% of the categorized responses and just over 1% of the categorized responses referenced international sanctions.

Comparison of these results with the outcomes of the Archetype Report indicate that in both studies the issues of Access/Filtering/Reliability are emphasized by about 80% of the participants. Also, between 70% and 80% of the participants in both the samples discuss the importance of eliminating speed limitations. Furthermore, more affordable pricing of the Internet is the concern of about a quarter of the participants in both datasets. Finally, content is a minor issue in both datasets (less than 5% discuss it).

¹⁴ Any participant could have referred to one or as many number of categories, therefore the percentages do not sum to 100%.

However, the Archetype responses highlight Security and Culture significantly more than the current dataset. This could be traced back to a number of factors, including the purposefully diverse range of individuals who were interviewed for the Archetype Report. Also, it is possible that while very distinct keyword exist for concepts such as Price and Filtering, the same is not necessarily true for the concept of internet culture, which is talked about in language which does not lend itself easily to automated coding. In terms of Security, one possibility is that the current dataset includes a higher ratio of tech-savvy individuals, including Twitter and Google+ users, who have a better understanding of the security requirements of the online world and are more comfortable with it. Participants in the Archetype study were also more concerned about international sanctions, while for this sample, the technical expertise of the participants means they are not unfamiliar with bypassing the existing roadblocks caused by sanctions; sanctions present less of a direct challenge to them. Further research is needed in order to discover other variables that explain the differences as well as the similarities between the two groups.

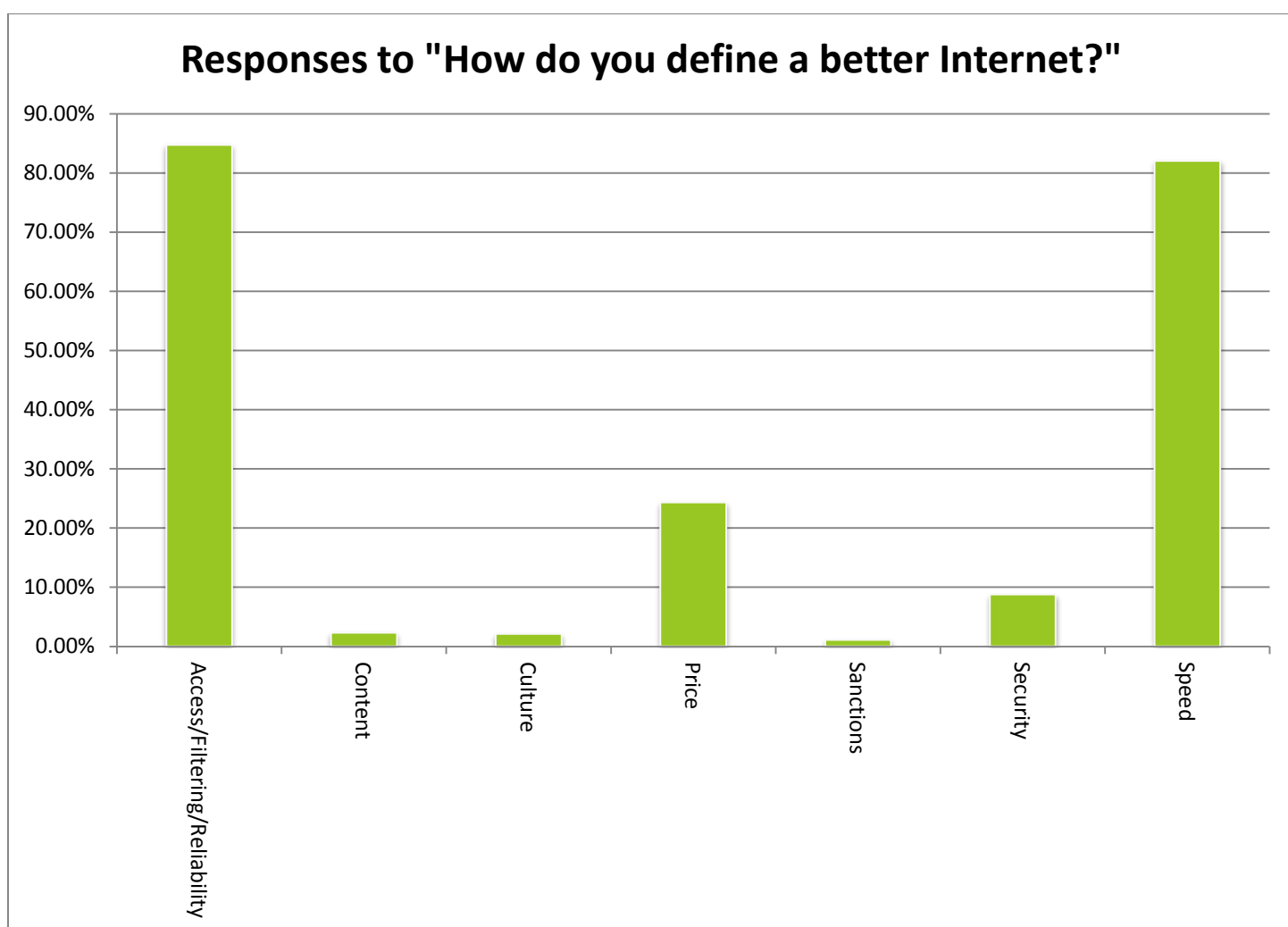


Figure 3 – Categorized responses to the question on “Better Internet”. Refer to the text for the details

While the commonalities of this work with the Archetype Report are important, it is also imperative to point out the distinctions between the two works. The Archetype Report assessed the responses given by a small group of carefully selected individuals and argued that large-scale blind polls suffer issues such as disputable

representativeness and the risk of being flooded by different interest groups. In other words, care must be given to avoid the over-generalization of web-poll results to society at large, even the ‘society’ of Internet users. Moreover, the individuals who participate in an online poll often end up inviting others to participate in it. This could result in an implicit bias, if not an arranged attempt to skew the outcomes of the poll toward the direction preferred by one particular group.

The current study is not safe against either of these concerns and this is where it departs from the Archetype work. The current work does not claim to be providing a fully representative picture of the ways in which Iranian Internet users perceive a “better Internet.” Among the reactions that this experiment caused on the web, there were individuals who questioned the necessity and appropriateness of a request to improve the situation with the Internet while Dr. Rouhani is not yet the official President of Iran, and given the other very pressing issues Iran faces. We find this argument a valid perspective, but one with which we do not completely agree.

“Better Internet means improved speed and quality, elimination of irrelevant and extreme filtering practices, and the establishment of the basis for e-commerce. New regulations are needed in order to encourage entrepreneurship in the virtual space.”

- From Tehran, Iran

The aims of this experiment were twofold: This experiment was carried out with the Iranian context in mind, where there is significant lack of public interfacing with governmental bodies and officials in order to advocate for positive change. This open letter was conceived as the first draft of a proposal to Iran’s future president to encourage improving Internet governance in the country. As such, the goal was to encourage the public to review such a proposal, discuss it publicly, and solicit feedback, which is why the question about how a ‘better internet’ was defined was posed directly to signatories to the letter. The second aim of this experiment was to take the ‘better internet’ question from the Archetypes Report, which inspired the most passionate responses, and compare those responses to those from a larger, less purposively selected group of individuals.

What is Next?

The letter and the signatures will be printed and the hardcopies will be submitted to the Office of the President after Dr. Hassan Rouhani takes office on August 3, 2013.¹⁵

Acknowledgements

We would not have been able to carry out this experiment if it was not for the sharing and resharing of the open letter by hundreds of Iranian Internet users. We also wish to thank the thousands of Iranians who provided their comments about how they perceive a “Better Internet.” We wish to thank Briar Smith and Nazanin Koochesfahani for providing their comments.

“I ask you, Mr. Rouhani, to pay attention to our requests and to work towards giving us access to free Internet. We will support you as long as you are walking in people’s way.”

- From Hamedan, Iran

¹⁵ The analysis of the responses will be published as a short document as well as two blog posts, one in English and one in Persian. The links to the reports on the experiment will be disseminated on the social media, in Persian and in English.

