Supporting Internet Freedom:
The Case of Iran

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Before going into media development, she spent 14 years at the *Des Moines Register* as an investigative reporter and Sunday magazine writer. She later became city editor for the *Columbia Missourian,* a newspaper produced at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, her alma mater. During the war in the Balkans, Ricchiardi's stories from the front lines appeared in several American publications, including the *Miami Herald, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, USA Today*, and *AJR.*

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Introduction

During his run for the presidency of Iran, Hassan Rouhani made a bold promise. If he won, he would push for greater Internet freedom in a country where citizens risk imprisonment and torture for what they post online.

The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Iran's elite military unit, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, command one of the world's most extensive Internet tracking and censorship operations. For years, Twitter, Facebook, and millions of smaller websites have been blocked.

Internet users have been dogged by surveillance, intimated by cyber police, and arrested for their online activities, particularly those deemed to be critical of the government or contrary to official interpretations of Islam.

When Rouhani won a surprise victory in June 2013, optimism swept the Iranian blogosphere. In a post-election speech, he declared, "The age of monologue media is over; media should be interactive . . . in a country whose legitimacy is rooted in its people, then there is no fear from free media."[1] He described social networking as a "welcome phenomenon," a far cry from Tehran's official line.[2] For netizens, his words signaled relief from cyber spies and persecution.

Months later, hope for a freer Internet has faded. Attacks against online users are escalating and, so far, the president has not spoken out publicly in their behalf. "Censorship of the Internet has only gotten worse, but it's more and more clear that Rouhani does not have complete control over this process," said cyber security expert Collin Anderson who has conducted research on Iran's Internet infrastructure.[3]

In Iran's complex political structure, Supreme Leader Khamenei is the head of state; President Rouhani answers to him. He has a steep uphill battle to fulfill promises about freeing up cyberspace. Paris-based Reporters Without Borders ranks Iran as one of the worst enemies of the Internet along with China and Syria.[4]

Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guard control a vast cyber army to spy on home computers, monitor cybercafés, block websites, and infiltrate Facebook accounts and other social networks.

In contrast, the U.S. State Department has made Internet freedom a foreign policy priority. During a March 2012 videotaped message on the Persian New Year, President Obama told Iranians, "The United States will continue to draw attention to the electronic curtain" that is cutting them off from the world.[5] That same day, a White House blogger likened Iran's war on the Internet to the Iron Curtain of the Cold War era.[6]

Given the centrality of U.S. government funding in international media development, it is important to keep an eye on shifting budgetary priorities. Since 2008, the State Department has poured close to $100 million into projects aimed at promoting Internet freedom around the globe, including circumvention tools and online safety for Iranian netizens. This comes as overall funding for media freedom and freedom of information–the two categories under which the State Department and USAID calculate media assistance spending–has declined.

From FY 2010 to FY 2012, the most recent comparable figures available to CIMA, annual funding for global Internet freedom work declined about 15 percent to approximately $17.8 million. But during the same period, funding in the overall categories of media freedom and freedom of expression (of which Internet freedom funding is a part) dropped by about 39 percent –from $124.8 million to $76.3 million.

While it is hard to know precisely what impact the emphasis on supporting Internet freedom has had globally, the state of Internet culture in Iran provides an interesting case study. Looking at the efforts of the U.S. government and the promises of Iran's new president, can it be said that the environment for Iranians who pursue the fundamental right of freedom of expression in cyberspace has improved?

Iran's Internet Landscape

The Internet has been described as a forum for free thought, entertainment, and social life for Iranians in an otherwise restricted environment. However, this haven is not beyond the regime's control.

For example, in January 2012, two men and two women were arrested and charged with "promoting vulgarity and corruption" for hosting a beauty competition on a Facebook page that attracted thousands of young people.[7]

Iran's repression of the Internet gained steam after the 2009 presidential election when thousands took to the streets to protest ultra conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's second victory amid charges of vote rigging.

E-mail, text messages, blog posts, Twitter, and Facebook were instrumental in organizing demonstrations that drew worldwide attention as defiant activists and police clashed. Images of security forces attacking civilians with batons, tear gas, and water cannon filled social networking websites. The Green Movement, as the uprising was known, led to what Amnesty International described as "the biggest crackdown on independent voices and dissent in Iran's modern history."[8]

As the presidential election approached in June 2013, the government slowed Internet connectivity to a crawl, blocked websites, and infiltrated social media platforms to thwart reformist and dissident activity. When voters gave moderate cleric Rouhani a victory, instead of riots, there was celebrating in the streets. For Web enthusiasts, a major question loomed: Could the new president successfully challenge the country's draconian Internet policies?

Iran boasts a higher percentage of Internet users than any other country in the region. For its 2013 country report on Iran's Internet, Article 19, a London-based organization that advocates for free expression, used statistics from InternetWorldStats.com to track online growth. According to the report, in 2012 there were approximately 42 million Internet users in Iran, or more than half the population. The Persian blogosphere is considered one of the most active in the world with an estimated 60,000 blogs.[9]

The Article 19 study noted, "Since its inception in 1993, the Internet has grown exponentially in Iran, at an average annual rate of approximately 48 percent, increasing from under one million Internet users in 2000 to around 23 million by 2008."[10]

Iranians face a range of state actors, from the morality police to the clergy, who constrain freedom of expression. Lacking actual forums where they can openly express their views, they're doing so virtually in cyberspace, striving to stay ahead of oppressive state agencies.

Online, Iranians can be themselves. Young women post their photos on Facebook wearing tight jeans, their hair fully visible. There are dating sites for singles and risqué music videos. Sports, poetry. and fashion are popular topics. So are conversations about sex. Last year, a group of Iranian women and men launched a Facebook campaign against the compulsory wearing of hijab.[11]

The emphasis on entertainment and pop culture is spurred by Iran's demographics. More than 60 percent of the country's population is under 30, as are nearly half of eligible voters.[12] According to the United States Institute of Peace, Iran has the most politically active youth among the 57 nations of the Islamic world, representing a threat to strict Islamist rule.[13]

The Internet also serves as a source of information and public opinion uncovered or distorted by state-run media outlets. When reformist newspapers were shuttered, journalists turned to e-publishing to get out the news. When public protests were banned, citizens spread their messages via social media. Gay men, lesbians, religious minorities, and women found their voice by forming groups to share their experiences and problems in the virtual world of the Web.

"In terms of their self-presentation and expression, Iranians can do online what they can't do in everyday life. The Internet has become a type of surrogate public sphere for them," said Briar Smith, who directs research at the Iran Media Program at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication.[14]

The regime, however, views the Internet as a dangerous weapon in a "soft war" being waged by the West to thwart Islamic rule and poison the minds of the Iranian people.

An ultra-conservative, staunchly pro-Islamist community that supports the regime also has a presence on the Web. Some bloggers hail the supreme leader, deny the Holocaust, applaud Hezbollah, and support Syria's President Bashar al-Assad. [15] Conservative politicians, political parties and some government officials use cyberspace to rally their constituencies, attack each other, and spread propaganda. "Iranians use the Internet the same way people anywhere in the world do. You hear many different voices," said Arash Abadpour, a popular Iranian blogger based in Canada.[16]

From the beginning, Iran's ruling clergy had split opinions about the Internet. They understood the potential economic and social benefits, but they felt threatened by the loss of control over public dialogue.

In a 2001 speech to the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, Ayatollah Khamenei described the Internet as "a blessing, but at the same time it can be a big catastrophe; a double edge and dangerous knife. The Internet is now unleashed . . . it is like someone bringing a wild dog and asking, `Where is his collar?'" [17]

In response to those fears, the regime has constructed a massive Big Brother network of regulatory bodies and laws to control cyberspace. Iran's constitution addresses press freedom with a caveat. Article 24 states, "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." Article 24 has been amended to include electronic publications and online content.[18]

Since 2009, Iran's Internet governance system has become far more complex. Four bodies–the Supreme Council on Cyberspace, the Committee Charged with Determining Offensive Content, the Cyber Army, and the Cyber Police–lead efforts to control online communication. Dozens of state cyber agencies answer to these four.

An example of the complexity: In 2009, a Cyber Crimes Law was passed, creating an Internet censorship body with legal clout. Following that, a cyber-crime unit was formed under the banner of the Iranian Cyber Police. That unit operates within the Iranian national police force. Among its responsibilities are "to collect and process data on Internet use and to gather intelligence on Internet users" and "to protect and preserve the religious and national identity of Iran."[19]

Khamenei created the Supreme Council on Cyberspace in April 2012 to solidify his control over the Internet. A report by the Iran Media Program noted, "The SCC is not only in charge of managing the state's cyber policies–and the myriad of state organs involved in Internet censorship and filtering–but also carrying out the state's planned transition to a national intranet that operates separately from the global cybersphere."[20]

The regime is creating a National Information Network, a state-run alternative to the Internet. Citizens would be able to communicate electronically within the country, but the government would control access to the World Wide Web.

How far reaching are the Islamic Republic's censorship powers?

From Freedom House's 2013 *Freedom on the Net r*eport: "The Iranian authorities continued to restrict access to tens of thousands of websites, particularly of international news sources, the opposition Green Movement, ethnic and religious minorities, and human rights groups. A member of the Commission to Determine the Instances of Criminal Content stated in April 2013 that about 1,500 'anti-religious websites,' including those that promote the Wahhabi or Baha'i faiths, are blocked each month." Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Flickr continue to be blocked.[21]

The report explained, "Despite all of these limitations, the Internet remains the only viable means for Iranian citizens and dissenters to obtain news and organize themselves. Traditional media outlets are tightly controlled by the authorities, and satellite broadcasting from outside Iran is subjected to heavy jamming."[22]

Iran has successfully blocked the most popular virtual private network ports that millions of Iranians use to bypass the state's filtering system. In March 2013, the *New York Times* reported, "People trying to visit illegal sites are being directed to a page on which users are encouraged to report illegal use of the Internet. This page, Peyvandha.ir, also explains in Persian that websites that promote 'debauchery, boozing, pornography, the sharing of pictures and advocating against religion' are forbidden."[23]

To survive, Iran's online users have become resourceful at tapping into censored information and avoiding cyber spies. They shop on the black market for a virtual private network to gain access to blocked content. They use tools like Tor, a free software program enabling online anonymity, and encryption schemes to make data unreadable without a password. All are illegal and could result in arrest.

"The risks [Internet users] take are embedded in their DNA. It is part of their daily life in Iran, and it has become more difficult for them during this last year," said Fred Petrossian, online editor-in-chief of Radio Farda, the Iranian branch of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Petrossian is in touch with Iranian bloggers through his radio show and blog posts. He says they have "heard lovely words said with a smile [but have seen] no significant change." [24]

Who has it right on

IRAN

and the Internet

?

The population is nearly 80 million.

Everyone agrees Iran has one of the fastest-growing Internet rates in the Middle East: but how many people with Internet access is another matter.

Sources vary widely on the actual Internet penetration rate in Iran. These numbers are from 2013.

Freedom House — 26%

RSF–RWB* — 32%

Small Media — 43%

Internet World Stats — 53%

MATMA** — 60%
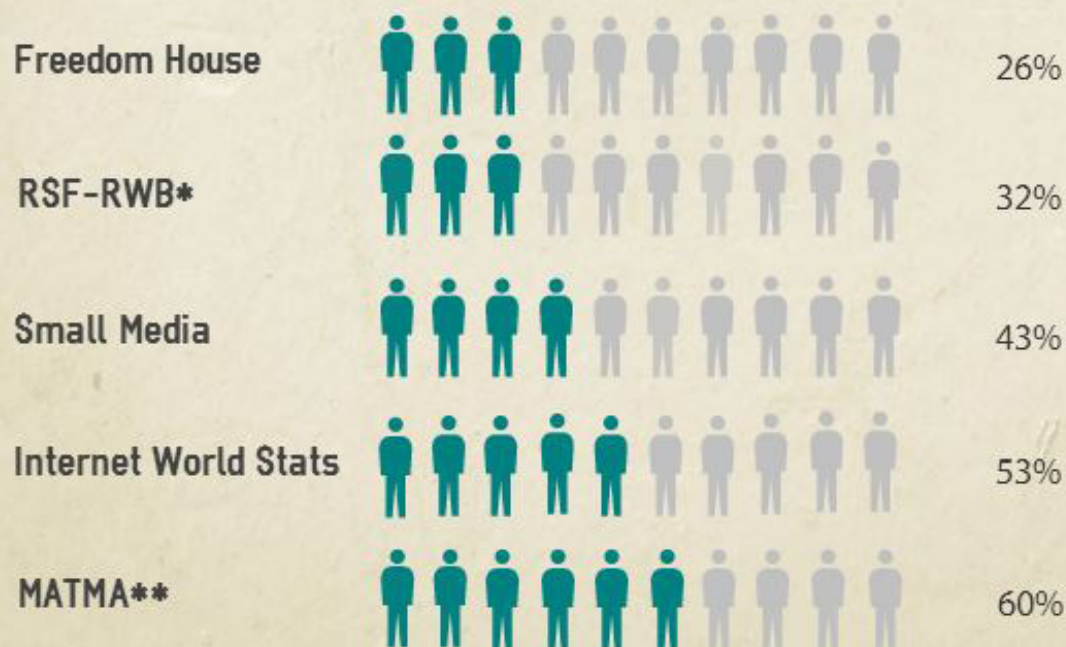
*Reporters Without Borders **National Internet Development Management Center

How Iranians Obtain Information

The Iran Media Program and London's Small Media Foundation publish research that provides a window into how Iranians obtain information. They address such questions as: How do Iranians get their news? Who are the different groups of users in Iran and how often do they use the Internet? What are their needs and issues?

In a 2012 study, IMP found that, "Overwhelmingly, traditional news media (TV, radio and press) were more frequently selected as the main information sources than new media (the Internet or text messages). Interpersonal contacts such as family and friends and neighbors or acquaintances were more often selected than new media."[25]

Besides the Internet, satellite television plays a major role in how Iranians obtain information. A November 2012 study by Small Media found at least 120 Persian-language satellite TV channels broadcasting into Iran from the diaspora despite government jamming.

The report noted "for the vast majority of inhabitants, satellite television is the only access point to information and entertainment not regulated by the authorities."[26] Satellite dishes, though illegal, are readily available in the underground market.

Within Iran, all radio and television broadcasting is government-controlled. Print publications must be licensed and must adhere to Islamic principles. Newspapers operate under the scrutiny of government censors and are closed or suspended for publishing material that the government says offends Islam.

A report by researchers Collin Anderson and Nima Nazeri looked at Iran's filtering of Wikipedia. Blocked pages fell into two categories on the Persian version: those with either socio-political or sexual content.

Those covered a wide range of topics, including articles "explaining tenets of the Baha'i faith; a biography of *Harry Potter* actress Emma Watson; and entries about an infamous political assassination campaign known as the Chain Murders and its victims. More than any single topic, the events following the 2009 elections appear to be of particular concern to state censors," the report said. Articles on sex acts; sex crimes; female clothing; romance; sexual health; and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues were blocked.[27]

Mixed Messages

When it comes to social networking, not everyone in Iran plays by the same rules.

It has been well publicized that President Rouhani, Foreign Minister Mohammed Javid Zarif, some cabinet members, and other high-ranking officials regularly use Facebook, Twitter, and other social media to air their political, religious, and societal views. To the regime's critics, this behavior represents a clear case of hypocrisy.

It made international headlines when Rouhani and Twitter's co-founder, Jack Dorsey, exchanged tweets in October. According to a report in the *Guardian*, Dorsey began the conversation by asking the president, "Are citizens of Iran able to read your tweets?" Rouhani replied, "My efforts geared 2 ensure my ppl'll comfortably b able 2 access all info globally as is their #right."[28]

So far, those efforts have fallen short. Iranians continue to grapple with inconsistencies and mixed messages about Internet usage.

For example, Iran's police chief, Gen. Esmail Ahmadi Moghaddam, stated publicly that there "is no harm in using these platforms for the purpose of national security," referring to social media websites. Yet, he also said he believes filtered websites should remain illegal for ordinary citizens.[29]

Along the same lines, Mahmoud Vaezi, minister of communications and information technology, announced the submission of a proposal to change filtering policies for Facebook and other social networks. Instead of removing filters, he proposed a new model so "citizens themselves can be cyber police and properly use these websites." Vaezi wants to allow access only to "positive pages with beneficial information" on social sites.[30]

Yet Vaezi said on television in 2014, "We should take steps to improve the Internet experience of people, including making shopping and paying bills online and arranging the delivery of packages easier.'' Officials say they are working on expanding bandwidth exponentially. "The work has already begun,'' Rouhani has said.[31]

The office of Ayatollah Khamenei launched a Facebook page on his behalf in December 2012. Iran's ruler also has Instagram, Google Plus, and YouTube accounts. Khamenei has been on Twitter since 2009 and posts in English as well as Farsi. The United States Institute of Peace website provides multiple examples of how the supreme leader uses social media. [32]

Not all Iranians oppose the strict control of cyberspace.

"People are bombarded by propaganda from the regime about the evils of the Internet. They get terrified and see it as an invasion of their cultural values. They think it means pornography and low morals–that's the sort of picture they have in their heads," said Iranian blogger Arash Abadpour. "If young people want to have fun and don't have the opportunity above ground, they will go underground–they will go to the Internet. That is what we are seeing in Iran today."[33]

Case in point: On a sweltering afternoon in August 2011, thousands of young people gathered in Tehran's Garden of Water and Fire for a water fight with plastic pistols. The flash mob had been organized through Facebook. Photos showed young women frolicking with their garments soaked and clinging to them. Some of the participants were arrested for behaving abnormally and disobeying Islamic principles, according to a statement by Tehran's police chief.[34]

Netizens Under Fire

In December 2013, Reporters Without Borders condemned a wave of arrests, including 24 news providers taken into custody in the cities of Rafsanjan, Kerman, and Tehran. Among the charges: insulting society's sacred beliefs and Islamic values online.

"The intelligence services are monitoring the Internet with great care and are cracking down on all possible violations," Rafsanjan's prosecutor boasted publicly.[35]

London's *Guardian* reported 16 cyber activists arrested for having links to foreign agents and seven journalists and technical staff of the technology news website, Narenji, taken into custody by Revolutionary Guards. Among the charges against them was "being in contact with enemy media based abroad with the aim of producing content for educational websites targeted at citizen-journalists."

"The arrests do not necessarily have the support of the [Rouhani] government but the moderate president has so far kept quiet over the new crackdown campaign," wrote the *Guardian*'s Saeed Kamali Dehghan.[36] They form part of a pattern of assaults on Internet users.

Sattar Beheshti, 35, was a little-known blogger until he died while in the custody of the cyber police in October 2012. His body clearly showed signs of torture. A *Wall Street Journal* article portrayed him as "the latest hero for Iran's pro-democracy movement."[37] Suddenly, his postings were being widely circulated. A year before he was arrested, Beheshti, a laborer from a working class family created a blog, "My Life for My Iran," and a Facebook page where he wrote about human rights violations and repression of free speech in his homeland. He had received several warnings to stop his postings.

The Associated Press reported that Beheshti had begun "to flirt with the well-known red lines in Iran, including direct criticism of Khamenei." In a blog just before his arrest, he described Iran's judiciary as a "slaughterhouse" for free expression.[38]

Iran's hard-liners use their propaganda machine, threats of imprisonment, and torture to instill fear and paranoia in the population. The state-controlled media demonize dissent as a weapon of foreign powers and enemies of the regime.

In one outstanding example, Hossein Shariatmadari, editor of *Kayhan*, an influential state newspaper, wrote what was described by the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center as, "a conceptual framework for the vilification

of cyber-journalists and bloggers that laid the groundwork for justifying and legitimizing the regime's efforts to silence them." The editorial, written in 2004, was titled "Spider House."[39]

Shariatmadari portrayed bloggers and journalists as part of an international scheme designed to attack the Islamic Republic's government. The United States was the command center. Members of the network used blogs and chat rooms to seduce young people and introduce them to "prostitution houses and other places of decadence."

Shariatmadari was handpicked by Khameini to run the newspaper and Kayhan Institute, a large publishing group. Many of those he cited as enemies of the state in his editorials were arrested.[40]

The Committee to Protect Journalists ranks Iran as the world's second worst jailer of journalists after Turkey. "A huge number of columnists, bloggers, editors, and reporters have been charged with crimes that seem outlandish, absurd, and Orwellian," said Sherif Mansour, CPJ's Middle East and North Africa program coordinator.[41]

Reporters Without Borders places the number of journalists and netizens arrested since June 2009 at more than 350.[42] In April 2013, CPJ posted the names and profiles of 45 journalists and netizens who are behind bars. Many were being held at Tehran's Evin Prison, notorious for rape, torture, and executions.

Among those listed was Hossein Derakhshan, sentenced in September 2010 to 19 years in prison. Nicknamed the "blogfather" by his followers, the journalist gained notoriety for developing a guide and software to enable Farsi speakers to blog in their native language. Officially, he was convicted of "cooperating with enemy states, making propaganda against the Islamic system of government, promoting small anti-revolutionary groups, managing obscene websites and insulting Islamic sanctities," according to CPJ. He resided in Canada prior to his arrest and was taken into custody a few weeks after he returned to Tehran in November 2008.

Three bloggers and IT professionals–Saed Malekpour, Vahid Asghari, and Ahmad Reza–received death penalties for online activities. [43] All were accused of hosting illegal content online and insulting and desecrating Islam.

To escape persecution, dozens of Iranian journalists have fled to the West. Since 2009, CPJ has been in contact with 68 Iranian journalists who left, half under the age of 35. They are spread among 18 countries, including France, Turkey, Germany, Norway, and the United States. [44]

While in Iran, Omid Habibinia worked many media jobs, from broadcast to online journalism. He fled in 2002 ahead of an arrest warrant after authorities discovered an underground film he'd made on the youth uprising against the regime. He settled in Switzerland and co-founded the International Association of Iranian Journalists to support media professionals inside and outside the country. There are around 100 dues-paying members.

When netizens and journalists are arrested, "They are forced to lie about how they are paid by the intelligence services of countries like United States, United Kingdom, and Israel to overthrow the regime. They are forced to admit to illicit sexual relations. The videotapes are played on state TV for all to see," said Habibinia, who was a researcher for state broadcasting when he fled at age 34.[45]

Many of those in exile have difficulty making a living, especially in the media business. CPJ reported that only 14 of the 68 they were in contact with were employed in the profession, either for international media outlets or with a Farsi language online publication. Some continue to blog but are unpaid.[46]

Even on foreign soil, they are vulnerable. In January 2013 the Guardian described a smear campaign, including identity theft and death threats, aimed at dozens of exiled Iranian journalists. Cyber-activists with ties to the Tehran regime posted false news reports, duplicated Facebook accounts and blogs and spread rumors of sexual misbehavior designed to discredit those living abroad.

A counterfeit site for BBC's Persian.com was set up at persianbbc.ir. with similar design and color but different content. A headline on the bogus site: "Death of Bin Laden, Saddam Hussein: fabricated stories by Washington."[47]

International media monitors have taken notice.

- Amnesty International's 2012 report described the horrors many Iranians face when they are arrested for expressing anti-government views. They are "beaten on the soles of the feet and the body, sometimes while suspended upside-down; burned with cigarettes and hot metal objects; subjected to mock execution; raped, including by other prisoners; confined in cramped spaces; and denied adequate light, food, water and medical treatment." [48]

- The 2012 U.S. State Department human rights report condemned government oppression, citing attacks by the cyber police and other government organizations against social networking sites. The report pointed to pervasive censorship, including reports of arriving

passengers at Tehran International Airport being forced to log into their YouTube and Facebook accounts, and in some cases deleting information officials deemed controversial.[49]

- In its latest report, Freedom House labeled the Iranian regime "one of the world's staunchest enemies of Internet freedom" as hundreds of Iranian bloggers, publishers, editors and reporters have been punished for their work or forced into exile to avoid persecution. Freedom House ranks Iran 187th out of 199 nations for press freedom.[50]

Media Resources and Circumvention

The U.S. State Department is leading global efforts to provide technology that will enable Internet users to bypass censors and circumvent blackouts of the telecommunications system in their countries. Many of the projects have not been made public, but the amount of funding and types of activities the money is used for helps paint the picture.

From 2008–2012, the State Department spent nearly $100 million on Internet freedom activities around the world. Of that, $76 million went to a category defined as "efforts to advance human rights online." The remaining $23 million was earmarked for seven specific areas including digital safety training, emergency response support for netizens under threat, and anti-censorship technology.

Channeled through the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, the bulk of that $23 million went for the first three categories and mainly was outsourced to NGOs.[51] Following is a description of three projects that were made public:

- **Internet in a suitcase.** The New America Foundation's Open Technology Initiative used a $2 million grant to develop a software program that would allow users to continue to communicate even when a government locked down the Internet. In a *New York Times* story, "U.S. Underwrites Internet Detour Around Censors," project leader Sascha Meinrath described what the kit includes: "small wireless antennas, which could increase the area of coverage; a laptop to administer the system; thumb drives and CDs to spread the software to more devices and encrypt the communications, and other components like Ethernet cables."[52]

- **The panic button.** An application called "InTheClear" allows users to erase all contacts and messages on their phone if they are arrested and lets them send a message informing contacts that they have been taken into custody.

- **A circumvention campaign.** Internews spearheaded circumvention efforts that, in one instance, operated in 12 authoritarian countries, including Iran.[53]

In 2013, the State Department added $15 million to its coffers to assist digital activists in "acutely hostile Internet environments." Of that, $8 million was slated for programs to enable Internet users to communicate despite filtering. The remaining funds went to policy and advocacy, research, and digital safety training.[54]

Funding from Congress to the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) supports two prominent Persian language broadcast operations—the Voice of America's Persian News Network (PNN) and Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty's Radio Farda. Both have a strong Internet presence, streaming content onto their websites and transmitting information via blogs and Twitter feeds.

The U.S. government provides around $30 million a year to the BBG for the development of circumvention tools. This funding has been crucial in bringing Tor, a program that enables users to communicate anonymously, to users in Iran and other repressive regimes. The BBG noted in its 2012 annual report that VOA's audience reach in Iran had increased to about 22 percent of the population.[55]

Some groups concentrate on using the Internet for educational purposes.

Tavaana E-Learning Institute for Iranian Civil Society was launched in May 2010 with seed money from the U.S. State Department to conduct live e-courses and webinars, many dealing with subjects forbidden by the Iranian government. The Tavaana project's parent organization, the E-Collaborative for Civic Education, has received support from the National Endowment for Democracy, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the United States Agency for International Development.

 Program Manager Layla Attia listed some of the project's accomplishments, including 29 e-courses and 47 webinars on such topics as women's rights, digital safety, gay rights in Islam, social entrepreneurship, democratic institutions, and power searching on Google. Participants connect securely from Iran to anonymous e-classrooms, and so far none have reported being compromised, according to Attia.[56]"

The National Endowment for Democracy also is working in the educational arena. The following are among projects NED funded in 2012–2013.

- $125,000 to raise public awareness of political developments and pro-democracy activities in Iran. The project will produce online news and analysis, expanding the website's features in the areas of news analyses, interviews, and video reporting in Farsi.

- $104,000 for continued availability of free and independent radio-based media for Iranians. The project will create content disseminated via its online radio in the form of news reports and feature articles.

- $52,000 to develop and electronically distribute effective presentations on means of engaging citizens in civic life in Iran.[57]

The San Francisco-based Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) supplies circumvention information to Iranians and cyber safety. With security concerns and lack of access, options to help are limited, said Danny O'Brien, EFF's supervisor for global strategy.

He sees two viable types of intervention: "Publicize as well as we can what's going on there and highlight individual cases of those being persecuted. Due to Iran's diplomatic status, there's not much more you can do but publish the names and raise awareness," said O'Brien, co-founder of the Open Rights Group, a digital civil liberties organization in the United Kingdom.

"On a second front, provide support and distribute tools that help Iranians get around censorship and electronic surveillance."[58] EFF lists the MacArthur Foundation, Open Society Institute, and Consumer Electronics Association among its supporters.

Security experts like O'Brien marvel at the resiliency of Iran's netizens. They break the law every time they use a circumvention tool, yet they keep at it, sometimes with the help of EFF and other supporters. They hold out hope that President Rouhani's promises will be realized, despite serious opposition from the regime.

Iran's netizens are not likely to be deterred. "No matter what the government does, people won't give up. For them, the Internet is not a luxury; it is an important part of life," said Akbar Musavi-Khoeini, a former member of Iran's Parliament (2000-2004) who was imprisoned and tortured for his work on behalf of citizens' rights.

Bloggers and activists inside can survive the terrible economy, skyrocketing unemployment and other hardships, "but they cannot survive without the Web. For them, access is crucial. They are willing to sacrifice for it," said Musavi-Khoeini, who resides in the United States and works with the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.[59]

Conclusion

The aim of this report is not to question the value of supporting Internet freedom in closed societies such as Iran. Rather, the intent is to provide a picture of how difficult it is to achieve progress in such countries. In times of tightening budgets for media development work, it is worth considering where best to place one's bets. While trying to improve access to the Internet for Iranians is a worthy goal in terms of foreign policy and human rights, it is less clear whether such efforts have had much immediate impact in improving Iran's media landscape, or in convincing the senior leadership that Internet freedom is indeed a worthy pursuit.

Looking forward, more work needs to be done to understand what kind of aid policies and approaches are most effective in societies such as Iran. Many donors would like to support the groups that are struggling to maintain open Internet access, and the immediate goal of helping Internet activists preserve some modicum of Internet freedom is clearly a worthy endeavor. The longer term goal will likely require not only preserving as many freedoms as possible now, but also a broader, more integrated program of support to the media sector that includes a combination of technical assistance and engagement with both civil society and the intelligentsia. Until such a wide engagement is possible, the outlook for freedom in Iran will likely remain gloomy.

Endnotes

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