IRAN AND THE INTERNET

Iran embraced the Internet early and aggressively, recognizing it as a new medium by which the state could strengthen its hand at home and improve broadcasting overseas. Iran's universities joined the global network in 1993, following behind only Israel as the second Middle East nation to embrace the digital age.[41] Initially, the Iranian government did not impose any censorship restrictions. It was thought that a free, unfettered Internet would serve the dual purposes of advancing scientific research and spreading Islamic scripture.[42] Gradually, however, Iran would impose severe limitations on digital communications. With time, the Iranian Internet would become increasingly paradoxical: a rich digital culture increasingly beset by religious authorities who seek to turn it to their own ends.

By the early 2000s, the Internet seemed poised to reshape Iranian society. Although the web offered a new platform to spread Islamic teachings, it also offered a refuge where forbidden ideas could be discussed freely. Many young Iranians took full advantage of the opportunity. In 2001, there were 1,500 Internet cafes in Tehran alone.[43] Blogging became a popular pastime; after the creation of the first Farsi-language blog in 2001, tens of thousands would shortly follow.[44] These politically engaged online communities joined with reform-minded politicians and clerics, creating a push for liberalization that touched most aspects of Iranian society.[45] For a theocratic state ruled by deeply suspicious religious scholars, a conservative backlash was inevitable.

The first major act of digital censorship came in 2001, when Iranian courts asserted control over Internet service providers (ISPs) and subjected them to strict monitoring and censorship standards. This was an extension of a general suppression of opposition media that began in 2000.[46] Following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, censorship enforcement became stricter and Iranian authorities began the first widespread arrest and torture of dissident bloggers.[47] Yet, the pattern of repression was still uneven. When the conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad ran for president in 2005, for example, he did so promising to roll back restrictions on digital speech. At voting booths in Tehran, Iranians talked excitedly of this modern candidate, in a suit as opposed to clerical garb, promising to open the window to a digital world from which they had been increasingly isolated.

As Iranian authorities were coming to see the Internet as a threat, foreign broadcasters saw new opportunity. BBCPersian.com, which launched in 2001, soon became the BBC's most popular non-English website (it would be blocked by Iran in 2006, although many visitors would find ways to circumvent the ban).[48] In 2003, the BBG created a free proxy service that enabled Iranians to continue to visit the websites of Radio Farda and Voice of America, despite mounting censorship efforts.[49] By the mid-2000s, the US government was investing significant resources in Iran-targeted websites and Internet programming, while young Iranians gravitated to new Western social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter.[50] At the same time, the Iranian government increasingly identified the Internet as the vector through which the United States and its allies were most likely to wage their "soft war."[51]

What remained of the free Iranian Internet was dealt a crippling blow in the aftermath of the 2009 Green Movement. Dozens of bloggers were arrested and detained indefinitely. Facebook and Twitter were blocked. That same year, the IRGC bought a controlling stake in the Telecommunication Company of Iran, the state's principal ISP, bringing Iranian Internet users under tighter surveillance.[52] In 2011, Iran created a "cyber police" unit, which quickly became infamous for detaining a thirty-

41 Babak Rahimi, "Cyberdissent: The Internet in revolutionary Iran," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 7, no. 3 (2003): 101-115.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Nasrin Alavi, *We are Iran: The Persian blogs*, (Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2005).
45 Rahimi, "Cyberdissent."
46 "False Freedom: Online censorship in the Middle East and North Africa," *Human Rights Watch* 17 no. 10(E) (November 2005): 42.
47 Ibid.
48 "Iran Blocks BBC Persian Website," *BBC*, January 24, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4644398.stm.
49 Kevin Poulsen, "US Sponsors Anonymiser – If You Live in Iran," *The Register,* August 29, 2003, https://www.theregister.co.uk/2003/08/29/us_sponsors_anonymiser_if_you/
50 Izadi, "US International Broadcasting," 143.
51 Monroe, "Iran and the Soft War."
52 Zanconato, "Iran – Media Landscapes."

Tens of thousands of Iranians took to the streets to protest irregularities in the 2009 Iranian presidential election. These protests soon became known as the "Green Movement." In their aftermath, Iranian authorities began to infiltrate and co-opt the digital platforms used by democratic activists. Source: Milad Avazbeigi/Wikimedia

five-year-old blogger and torturing him to death.[53] In 2012, Iran announced a Supreme Council of Cyberspace, which placed Internet regulation more directly in the hands of religious—not secular—authorities.[54] In recent years, Iran has sought ever more control of online spaces, following government consensus that the Internet has become an information battleground, a tool of soft war, to be harnessed by the state and rationed to the people.

More sophisticated surveillance, coupled with regular arrest and imprisonment for "propaganda against the state," has strangled Iran's independent journalistic community, even under the watch of the ostensibly moderate President Hassan Rouhani.[55] The government has also begun to crowdsource censorship to thousands of volunteers, who report speech violations to judicial authorities.[56] All the while, Iran continues its slow work on the so-called "National Internet Project," initiated in 2011,

53 Ibid.

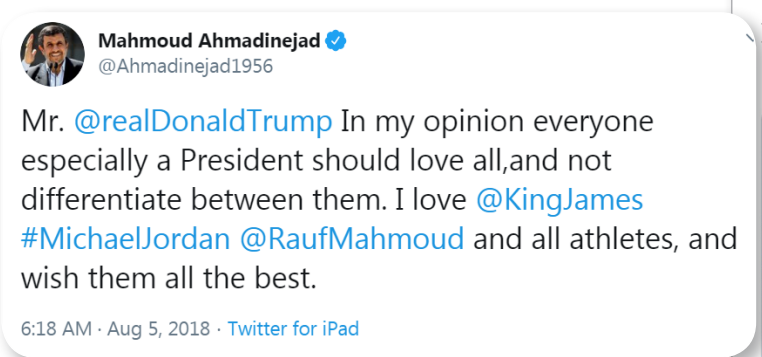
54 Kristin Deasy, "Supreme Council of Cyberspace, New Online Oversight Agency, to Launch in Iran," *PRI*, March 7, 2012, https://www.pri.org/stories/2012-03-07/supreme-council-cyberspace-new-online-oversight-agency-launch-iran

55 Heshmat Alavi, "Analysis: How to Define Iran's Hassan Rouhani as a 'Moderate'," *Al Arabiya*, May 29, 2017, https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2017/05/29/How-to-define-Iran-s-Hassan-Rouhani-as-a-moderate-.html

56 "Iran's Revolutionary Guard Targets 450 Social Media Users," *Seattle Times*, August 23, 2016, https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/irans-revolutionary-guard-targets-450-social-media-users/.

which envisions the creation of a wholly separate Internet.[57] This "halal" digital ecosystem, free from foreign websites and influence, would allow complete awareness of all Internet traffic in the country—and total control over user data and speech. In May 2019, Iran announced that this system was 80 percent complete, although many questions remain regarding the effectiveness and feasibility of its implementation.[58]

The most significant test of Iran's new Internet controls came in November 2019, when the government raised fuel prices by 50 percent overnight, sparking widely attended protests in at least one hundred cities.[59] Iranian censors sprang into action, eliminating Internet access in the country for ninety hours—and slowing it to a crawl for days thereafter.[60] By measure of scale and effectiveness, it was the largest Internet shutdown in history.[61] Over that period, police and security officials responded with violence, killing as many as 1,500 unarmed protestors over the course of a month.[62] Despite the staggering death toll, however, the communications blackout effectively starved the protestors of contemporaneous international support.



In recent years, both Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad have launched popular English-language Twitter feeds in a bid to communicate with the wider digital public. This occurs even as Twitter remains forbidden to the Iranian people. Source: Twitter

Yet, even with these tightening government controls, some fifty-six million Iranians—70 percent of the population—are now regular Internet users.[63] Many banned services, like Facebook, still enjoy widespread domestic popularity, thanks to the evasion of Internet filters and toleration by some state enforcers (in 2017, there were still as many as forty million Iranian Facebook users).[64] Today, the locus of Iranian digital life is the fashion-friendly Instagram (at least twenty-four million users) and the encrypted Telegram (at least forty million users, despite a limited ban).[65] Yet, as the Iranian people have found new online refuges, authorities follow close behind. On Instagram,

57 "Tightening the Net: Internet Security and Censorship in Iran Part 1: The National Internet Project," *Article 19* (March 2016), accessed January 24, 2020, https://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/38315/The-National-Internet-AR-KA-final.pdf.

58 "Iran Says Its Intranet Almost Ready to Shield Country from 'Harmful' Internet," *Radio Farda*, May 20, 2019, https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-says-its-intranet-almost-ready-to-shield-country-from-harmful-Internet/29952836.html.

59 Peter Kenyon, "Higher Gasoline Prices in Iran Fuel Demonstrations," *NPR Morning Edition*, podcast audio, November 19, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/11/19/780713507/higher-gasoline-prices-in-iran-fuel-demonstrations.

60 "Internet disrupted in Iran Amid Fuel Protests in Multiple Cities," *Netblocks*, November 15, 2019, https://netblocks.org/reports/Internet-disrupted-in-iran-amid-fuel-protests-in-multiple-cities-pA25L18b.

61 Tamara Qiblawi, "Iran's 'Largest Internet Shutdown Ever' is Happening Now. Here's What You Need to Know," *CNN*, November 18, 2019, https://edition.cnn.com/2019/11/18/middleeast/iran-protests-explained-intl/index.html.

62 "Special Report: Iran's Leader Ordered Crackdown on Unrest – 'Do Whatever It Takes to End It," *Reuters*, December 23, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-protests-specialreport/special-report-irans-leader-ordered-crackdown-on-unrest-do-whatever-it-takes-to-end-it-idUSKBN1YR0QR.

63 "Iran," *Internet World Stats*, accessed January 24, 2020, https://www.internetworldstats.com/me/ir.htm.

64 Zanconato, "Iran – Media Landscapes."

65 Fariba Parsa, "Forget Telegram: Iranians are Using Instagram to Shop," *Atlantic Council*, October 17, 2019, https://atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/forget-telegram-iranians-are-using-instagram-to-shop/.

state-aligned trolls harass and threaten users, particularly women, who are perceived to act in an "un-Islamic" fashion.[66] On Telegram, the administrators of popular discussion groups have been regularly summoned by the IRGC, which reminds them that they are being watched.[67]

Ironically, as Iran has curtailed Internet freedom for its own citizens, the state has greatly expanded its use of social media platforms for diplomacy and propaganda abroad. These public-facing activities have been most prominent on Twitter. In 2013, President Rouhani famously shared his desire for rapprochement with the United States via his English-language Twitter account.[68] Soon thereafter, Ayatollah Khamenei—who had registered a Twitter account shortly after the 2009 Green Revolution—also began to regularly tweet in English, commenting on issues like the 2014 Black Lives Matter protests in Ferguson, Missouri.[69] Even former President Ahmadinejad, who himself oversaw the banning of Twitter in 2009, joined the platform in 2018 to build his foreign following. His seemingly innocuous sports commentary briefly made him a US social media celebrity.[70]

Yet, the increasing Twitter activity of Iranian politicians represents just the most visible piece of a much broader digital influence campaign.[71] In the last five years, the major foreign broadcasting initiatives of the IRIB—Al Alam, PressTV, Hispan TV, and Pars Today—have all established significant web presences. At the same time, Iran has seeded a vast network of social media sockpuppets and fabricated websites, forging a new kind of propaganda apparatus in the process.

66 Simin Kargar and Adrian Rauchfleisch, "State-aligned trolling in Iran and the double-edged affordances of Instagram," *New Media & Society* 21, no. 7 (2019): 1506-1527.

67 "Iran's Revolutionary Guard."

68 Christophe Lachnitt, "Twitter Revolutionizes International Relations," *Superception*, October 6, 2013, https://www.superception.fr/en/2013/10/06/twitter-revolutionizes-international-relations/.

69 Kay Armin Serjoie, "Why the Twitter Account Believed to Belong to Iran's Supreme Leader Keeps Mentioning Ferguson," *Time*, December 3, 2014, https://time.com/3618706/iran-ferguson-u-s-twitter/.

70 Joseph A. Wulfsohn, "Slate Publishes Puff Piece on Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Calls Him a 'Lovable Twitter Rascal'," *Fox News*, December 12, 2018, https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/slate-publishes-puff-piece-on-mahmoud-ahmadinejad-calls-him-a-lovable-twitter-rascal.

71 Golnaz Esfandiari, "Iranian Politicians Who Use Twitter Despite State Ban," *RadioFreeEurope Radio Liberty*, August 28, 2017, https://www.rferl.org/a/iranian-politicians-twitter-ban/28701701.html.