

Iran

	2014	2015		
Internet Freedom Status	Not Free	Not Free	Population:	77.4 million
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	22	20	Internet Penetration 2014:	39 percent
Limits on Content (0-35)	31	31	Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked:	Yes
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	36	36	Political/Social Content Blocked:	Yes
TOTAL* (0-100)	89	87	Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested:	Yes
			Press Freedom 2015 Status:	Not Free

* 0=most free, 100=least free

Key Developments: June 2014 – May 2015

- The ICT ministry's budget reached its highest level in history, reflecting increasing investments in both internet infrastructure and censorship tools (see **Availability and Ease of Access**).
- An exclusive 3G contract issued to mobile operator RighTel was not renewed, thereby opening up licensing to all operators in a move that was not welcomed by the Supreme Council of Cyberspace and hardliners, who regard mobile internet as "un-Islamic" (see **Regulatory Bodies**).
- While the administration of President Hassan Rouhani did not fulfill campaign promises to unblock popular social media platforms, the government managed to change content blocking procedures to give government ministers more say over hardliners appointed by the Supreme Leader. This enabled the ICT ministry to push back against attempts to block chatting apps WhatsApp and Viber (see **Blocking and Filtering**).
- Several news sites were blocked throughout the year for publishing news on corruption or images of former political leaders that have fallen out of favor with the Supreme Leader (see **Blocking and Filtering**).
- In August 2014, Iranian cartoonist Atena Farghadani was arrested on charges of insulting state officials and spreading propaganda for posting an image of a parliamentary vote on reproductive rights. She was released in December, only to be rearrested one month later after uploading a video describing the abuse she faced at the hands of prison guards. She was sentenced to more than 12 years in prison in August 2015 (see **Prosecutions and Detentions**).
- In July and August 2014, authorities prevented an estimated 75 percent of users from connecting to Tor, an anonymous web-browsing tool used to evade censorship and surveillance (see **Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity**).

Introduction

Hassan Rouhani was elected president in 2013 promising to improve the lives of Iranians and ease restrictions on the use of the internet. The promises were particularly well received by Iranians, who during the final 18 months of former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's term saw conditions for internet freedom worsen. Upon the start of his presidency, the Rouhani administration increased the budget for SHOMA, Iran's "national information network," which aims to improve connectivity in Iran, while also enhancing the authorities' ability to control the network and monitor citizens' online activities. In a positive development, the Rouhani government made 3G licenses available to all mobile operators, creating the potential to diversify the market and increase access.

Rouhani's administration has faced stiff resistance from hardliners demanding the maintenance of speed restrictions to prevent "un-Islamic behavior" and the filtering of messaging services such as WhatsApp and Viber. While Rouhani's administration has successfully resisted some demands, many limits on content remain in place, and violations of user rights continue. In one case from July 2014, 8 Facebook activists were sentenced to a combined 127 years in prison for anti-government posts. In general, internet policy remains a contested space in Iran, with the hardliners viewing the internet as a threat to national security and favoring a "security-first" approach. Internet policy in Iran will continue to be shaped by differing state bodies, but like many other aspects of policymaking in Iran, the sector is ultimately controlled by the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei.

Despite these limitations, the internet remains the only viable means for Iranian citizens and dissenters to obtain news and organize themselves. Savvy users employ virtual private networks (VPNs) or other circumvention tools to access blocked content, turning to new services if existing ones are blocked by the authorities. This cat-and-mouse game largely continued over the past year.

Obstacles to Access

Most improvements to internet freedom that have come under the presidency of Hassan Rouhani relate to access and the ICT market. The ICT ministry's budget reached its highest level in history, reflecting increasing investments in both internet infrastructure and censorship tools. National bandwidth increased by 2.5 times over the past year. The ICT ministry did not renew an exclusive 3G contract issued to mobile operator RighTel, thereby opening up licensing to all operators in a move that was not welcomed by the Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC) and hardliners, who regard internet-enabled mobile phones as "un-Islamic."

Availability and Ease of Access

Statistics on the number of internet users in Iran are inconsistent and highly disputed, though most observers agree that usage continues to grow. According to the National Internet Development Management Center (MATMA), the national internet penetration rate was 49 percent in 2014-15,¹ which is lower than the figure of 61 percent that was reported by the same agency one year ago. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) estimated the number of internet users in Iran at 39 percent of the population for 2014, up from 14 percent in 2009. Citing the Iranian Information

1 "Internet penetration has reached 49%," [in Farsi] *Mehrnews*, accessed March 29, 2015, <http://www.mehrnews.com/news/2315164/>.

Technology Organization as its source, the ITU also said there are only 9.46 fixed-broadband subscriptions per every 100 inhabitants.²

Internet access in Iran remains relatively expensive considering the speed and quality of service, for two principal reasons. Firstly, the state-owned Telecommunications Infrastructure Company (TIC) holds an effective monopoly over the domestic bandwidth market, reselling bandwidth to ISPs. Mostafa Mohammadi, former secretary of Iran's ISP Association, claimed the Telecommunications Company of Iran (TCI), one of the largest ISPs, buys internet bandwidth for under USD 1,000 and resells it to ISPs for around USD 11,300.³ Secondly, the demand for bandwidth is very high in the country, while its availability remains very low, due to political pressure.

There have been numerous promises by various officials to increase internet speeds. However, Iranian users are forced to endure some of the slowest connection speeds in the world. Even President Rouhani criticized Iran's glacial internet speeds, joking that sometimes downloading an article takes so long that people fall asleep in front of their computers waiting for it to finish.⁴ According to Akamai, the leading global content delivery network, Iran has the world's lowest average peak connection speed, at 6.0 Mbps.⁵

Rouhani's administration has stepped up efforts to implement SHOMA, the national information network, by bolstering the ICT Ministry's budget to the highest it has ever been, with a large portion of the budget allocated to SHOMA.⁶ The Iranian government announced an investment of IRR 100,000-120,000 billion (USD 3.75–4.5 billion) to accelerate SHOMA's completion, though it seems the development of SHOMA has been partially hampered by the government's difficulties importing the required hardware from other countries.⁷ Nonetheless, SHOMA helped increase national bandwidth by 2.5 times in the past year, providing Iranian users with better speeds when trying to access websites hosted inside Iran. However, it has been stated that further increases in international bandwidth are conditional on the introduction of "intelligent filtering."⁸

Worryingly, SHOMA will create the infrastructure inside Iran that will allow the Iranian government to develop a national web ecosystem, while giving the authorities a better grip over the flow of traffic in Iran. Authorities hope that the development of a national web ecosystem will result in less reliance on international web services and will accordingly decrease the level of public discontent if major international web services are blocked. SHOMA will also increase the security of the state's critical web infrastructure, in light of recent major cyberattacks against Iran. Officials from the government have even reached out to the Chinese government to enlist their help with its completion.⁹

2 International Telecommunication Union, "Statistics," 2015, <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.

3 "10 fold increase of the internet at the border," [in Farsi] *Alef*, accessed March 29, 2015, <http://alefir.vdcdn90xxyt0so6.2a2y.html?236492>.

4 "Rouhani: One might fall asleep while browsing!," *ITNA*, accessed March 29, 2015, <http://www.itna.ir/vdcgwz9w.ak9xy4prra.html>.

5 Akamai, *State of Internet: Q1 2014 Report*, accessed March 29, 2015, <http://akamai.me/1NHO400>.

6 "The mistakes of Ahmadinejad's government," [in Farsi] *Mehrnews*, accessed March 29, 2015, <http://mehrnews.com/news/2324987>.

7 "SHOMA is dependent on a few other countries," [in Farsi] *ITanalyze*, accessed March 29 2015, <http://bit.ly/1QtHGik>.

8 "Minister of ICT's answer to the filtering ultimatum," [in Farsi] *ISNA*, accessed March 29, 2015, <http://www.isna.ir/fa/news/93070905890/>.

9 Ministry of ICT, "Exchanging experience with China in the field of ICT," [in Farsi] accessed February 10, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1Ph2R2T>.

Restrictions on Connectivity

The Data and Communication Company (DCC), which operates under the Telecommunications Infrastructure Company (TIC), retains a monopoly on internet traffic flowing in and out of Iran. The TIC is a state-owned enterprise under the ICT ministry. The arrangement affords the Iranian authorities with total control over the internet backbone, as well as the ability to limit access or throttle speeds during sensitive political moments, which last occurred in the lead-up to the 2013 presidential elections. The heavy influence of the TCI in the ICT market also grants the security apparatus the ability to control third-party ISPs and to monitor online activities, since the TCI's majority shareholder is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

ICT Market

The telecommunications industry in Iran is tightly controlled by the government or related entities. In recent years, the role of the IRGC—a politically important branch of the security forces that also controls large sections of the economy—in the ICT sector has notably increased.¹⁰ In September 2009, for example, the IRGC purchased a controlling stake in the Telecommunications Company of Iran (TCI), the country's main provider of internet and mobile phone services. Other providers must purchase bandwidth from the DCC. Direct access to the internet via satellite is only permitted for certain institutes and is prohibited for personal use. The mobile phone market is under similar state influence. IranCell, the second largest mobile operator behind the TCI, is owned in part by a web of proxy companies controlled by the IRGC and has a number of high profile IRGC ex-commanders among its management. The third operator, RighTel, was launched in early 2011. It, too, is a government-owned entity.

Meanwhile, cybercafes remain under the close scrutiny of officials. Five cybercafes have been shut down by FATA (North Khorasan Province) due to legal breaches.¹¹ All cybercafes in Iran must follow a series of regulations such as engaging in CCTV surveillance, and keeping full records of all users' internet activity.

Regulatory Bodies

There is no independent regulatory body for ICTs in Iran. The Communications Regulatory Authority (CRA), which falls under the ICT Ministry, is responsible for telecommunications licensing. Its head is appointed by the ICT minister.¹² The CRA has taken several actions to improve quality of service and reduce prices for Iranian users, for example, by banning the TCI in Mazandaran province from selling internet services due to poor quality of service and overcharging.¹³ According to the CRA, ISPs in Iran have erroneously received IRR 17 billion (USD 646 million) from their customers as a result of miscalculations. The CRA also slashed the price of mobile data from IRR 2.5 to IRR 0.5 per kilobyte.¹⁴

10 "The Revolutionary Guards is entering the IT market," [in Farsi] *Digarban*, December 12, 2011, <http://www.digarban.com/node/3715>.

11 Iran Cyber Police (FATA), "Introducing 5 Internet Cafes to the Judiciary," [in Farsi] accessed March 29, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1Mr3xwk>.

12 Communications Regulatory Commission of Iran, official website, accessed July 31, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1Lum12y>.

13 "7 cases of misconducts were identified in the ICT market," [in Farsi] *Mehrnews*, accessed March 29, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1G6i0Bo>.

14 "The price mobile data has decreased," [in Farsi] *FarsNews*, accessed March 29, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1K9G3u1>.

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In a positive but confrontational move, the ICT ministry did not renew an exclusive 3G contract issued to RighTel, a mobile operator in Iran. This allowed other mobile operators to offer data services to their customers, increasing access to more Iranians. As a result, data traffic on TCI's mobile network increased by 500 percent in the last year.¹⁵ However, the provision of 3G licenses to all the operators was not welcomed by the Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC), which complained that the ICT ministry did not ask for its permission to offer 3G licenses and stated that it would be illegal for the government to do so before further development of SHOMA.¹⁶ Naser Makarem Shirazi, one of Iran's grand ayatollahs, branded high speed internet on mobile phones "un-Islamic," arguing that the regulations and tools necessary to prevent corruption are not yet available.¹⁷ The Iranian parliament also threatened to impeach the ICT minister if internet speeds are increased prior to the launch of SHOMA.¹⁸

The SCC was established by decree of the Supreme Leader Khamenei in March 2012. It is intended to provide a centralized focal point for policymaking and the regulation of Iran's virtual space, effectively minimizing the roles of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the government and bringing it under Khamenei's direct control. Observers believe this reflected Khamenei's dwindling trust in former president Mahmood Ahmadinejad to lead such an important area of policy.

Limits on Content

Significant limits on content remain in place. While the administration of President Hassan Rouhani has not fulfilled campaign promises to unblock popular social media platforms, the government has succeeded in changing procedures behind the blocking of content to give government ministers more say over hardliners appointed by the Supreme Leader. In another positive move, the ICT ministry successfully pushed back against attempts to block chatting apps WhatsApp and Viber. Nonetheless, several news sites were blocked throughout the year for publishing news on corruption or images of former political leaders that have fallen out of favor with the Supreme Leader. The high level of self-censorship and the blocking of social media continued to stymie any significant digital activism.

Blocking and Filtering

The Iranian authorities continued to restrict access to tens of thousands of websites in 2014-2015, particularly those of international news sources, the opposition, ethnic and religious minorities, and human rights groups. Websites are also filtered if they differ from the official doctrine of the state's Islam.¹⁹

The mobile messaging app WhatsApp became a symbol of the power struggle between hardliners and President Rouhani's government. On April 30, 2014, the CDICC ordered the ICT Ministry to block WhatsApp. Shortly afterwards, ICT Minister Mahmoud Vaezi announced that the proposed blocking of WhatsApp had been suspended by President Hassan Rouhani. According to Vaezi, President Rou-

15 "MCI's mobile data has increased by five fold," [in Farsi] *ITNA*, accessed March 29, 2015, <http://www.itna.ir/vdchzwnx.23nvmdf2.html>.

16 "3G has been launched without SCC's permission," [in Farsi] *Farsnews*, accessed March 29, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1OwulMa>.

17 "Minister of ICT response to Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi," [in Farsi] *Farsnew*, accessed March 29, 2015, <http://bit.ly/13IYKYG>.

18 "We will impeach [the Minister] for increasing the internet bandwidth," *ITIran*, accessed March 29, 2015, <http://itiran.com/d/67717>.

19 "Ayatollah Shirazi's website got filtered," [in Farsi] *Asreghanoon*, accessed on March 29, 2015, <http://goo.gl/fPB0R0>.

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hani considers the Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC) responsible for managing policy relating to social networks, while the CDICC is an administrative committee that implements policy. CDICC Secretary Abdolsamad Khoramabadi responded by stating that the president does not have the power to suspend the CDICC's orders, and insisted that the Rouhani government must execute the committee's rulings. Vaezi pointedly remarked that Khoramabadi is merely the secretary of a committee, and that he has no authority to issue orders to either the President, or to the SCC.²⁰ As the result of this standoff, WhatsApp and Viber have remained accessible.

Meanwhile, popular social networks such as Twitter and Facebook remain blocked in Iran. Despite Rouhani's promise to unblock social networks during his campaign, the ICT minister has denied the claim, while emphasizing the need for private companies and universities to develop domestic social networks for Iranians. He went on to point out that filtering is not the responsibility of his ministry; rather, it falls under the purview of the CDICC. This contradicts an earlier statement made by Vaezi but reflects how the Rouhani government has evaded responsibility for the unblocking of popular social networks.²¹

Iran continues to block some major international news websites, such as the BBC, as well as Persian news websites based outside of Iran. News websites based in Iran continue to operate in a very restrictive environment, which occasionally results in filtering actions. A few examples include:

- On September 4, 2014, the news agency Dana was blocked after publishing a news article about corruption allegations facing former IRGC commander Mohammad Rouyanian. Rouyanian was arrested on May 6, 2014 and charged with financial corruption and money laundering.²²
- On September 30, 2014, *Salam Noo* was blocked by the General Prosecutor of Tehran, without any explanation. Launched in August 2014, the website is close to the minority Islamic Kar Party.²³
- On February 27, 2015, *Jamaran*, the website that covers news of former supreme leader Khomeini's family, and *Bahar News* were blocked after publishing a photo of former president Khatami, who is banned from receiving any publicity. Both sites were unblocked after removing the photo.²⁴

Internet traffic over cell phones is subject to a similar level of restrictions as fixed-line connections. Iranians are barred from making video calls on their mobile phones due to the concern that this technology will bring about "cultural damage."²⁵ Similarly, dating websites have also been blocked after FATA announced that all dating websites in Iran are illegal and lack permission to operate.²⁶ Clash of Clans, a popular game amongst Iranians, has been blocked without explanation. According

20 Kyle Bowen and James Marchant, "Internet Censorship in Iran: Preventative, Interceptive, and Reactive," in *Revolution Decoded: Iran's Digital Landscape*, Small Media, 2014/2015, <http://bit.ly/1IIDomy>.

21 "Filtering is not related to TCI," [in Farsi] *Mellat Iran*, accessed on March 29, 2015, <http://goo.gl/h9qawK>.

22 "Dana got filtered," [in Farsi] *Bultan News*, accessed on May 7, 2015, <http://www.bultannews.com/fa/news/219135/>.

23 "Editor of Salam Noo: No reason was given to us for the filtering of our site" [in Farsi] *Aftab News*, accessed on May 7, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1LMRyst>.

24 "Jamaran and Bahar News are filtered," [in Farsi] *Farsnews*, accessed on May 7, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1QtLhpy>.

25 "When the bans on videos calls will be removed?" [in Farsi] *Isna*, accessed May 7, 2015, <http://www.isna.ir/fa/news/93053116102>.

26 Small Media, *Iranian Internet Infrastructure and Policy Report*, September 2014, 10, <http://bit.ly/1NHQkVK>; Mehrnaz Samimi, "A guide to Iranian online dating," *Al Monitor*, July 23, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1Oww0a5>.

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to Iran Clash, users have seen connection error message when trying to play it on their phones and tablets.²⁷ Iranian mobile users have only intermittent access to major app stores such as Apple's iTunes or Google Play, either due to blocking by the Iranian government (in the case of the former) or by the providing company (with regard to the latter).

SMS content is also subject to filtering. For instance the term, "come to eat" was blocked by IranCell in July 2014. The term is an everyday phrase in the Persian language, though it also has sexual connotations when used colloquially. During the election period, SMS messages containing the word "Mashaei" were blocked, referring to Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, the presidential candidate supported by Ahmadinejad. Texts containing political slogans related to Mashaei and Ahmadinejad have also been blocked in the past.

Currently there is no legal framework for filtering SMS content. However, in June 2013, the SCC's director announced that it will work with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to draft a new bylaw for monitoring the content of mass and promotional text messages.²⁸ The CRA has also introduced new regulations that require all commercial SMS senders to submit the content of each SMS or service to the CRA for review prior to sending.²⁹

Iranian authorities currently employ a centralized filtering system that can effectively block a website within a few hours across the entire network in Iran. Private ISPs are forced to either use the bandwidth provided by the government or route traffic containing site-visit requests through government-issued filtering boxes developed by software companies inside Iran. The filtering boxes search for banned text strings—either keywords or domain names—in the URL requests submitted by users, and block access accordingly.

Internet filtering, which began toward the end of the Khatami presidency in 2005, has become more severe since the disputed presidential election in June 2009. Calls for an "intelligent filtering" system, using a technique known as deep-packet inspection (DPI), continue to be announced by various officials in order to allow for the blocking of specific pages within a site rather than blocking the entire site. There have been a number of vague announcements that some parts of this system have been launched, but no specific details have been provided. The system would "recognize" URLs and block a specific part of the address, rather than the entire domain. The system would also define different access levels for various users. For instance, students would have a specific level of access so that they can conduct research for their papers. It has also been announced that the system would analyze videos, images, and audio files, and decide which ones to block. Analyzing multimedia content or encrypted content (HTTPS) will be technically very resource intensive, if not impossible. For instance, after the ICT minister announced that intelligent filtering had been successfully applied to Instagram, Instagram enabled a default SSL encryption on its entire platform, resulting in blocked pages becoming available again.³⁰

In an effort to show that content filtering is based on a legal framework, institutions to oversee internet filtering have been created. The Committee for Determining Instances of Criminal Content (CDICC) is empowered to identify sites that carry forbidden content and report such information to the TCI and other major ISPs for blocking. The committee is headed by the prosecutor general, and

27 "Problem with entering to Clash of Clans," [in Farsi] *IranClash*, accessed on March 29, 2015, <http://goo.gl/LdVC4r>.

28 "Drafting a law for the SMS filtering," [in Farsi] Mehrnews, accessed February 12, 2014, <http://www.mehrnews.com/detail/News/2083498>.

29 "The regulation for sending bulk SMS," *ITNA*, accessed February 12, 2014, <http://itna.ir/vdci55ar.t1ayr2bcct.html>.

30 Raphael Satter, "Iran's censors struggle to keep Bieber's abs off Instagram," *AP*, May 7, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1Mr5mt8>.

its members are representatives from 12 governmental bodies. Little information is available about the inner workings of the committee, and censorship decisions are often arbitrary and nontransparent. According to the law, the committee should meet biweekly to decide on any website bans, though the bulk of filtering decisions are likely made upon discovery of objectionable content, or by a small technical team. In addition, owners of websites registered with the Ministry of Culture have complained that they received no explanation when their websites were filtered.³¹ The authorities claim there is a procedure for disputing filtering decisions. However, the process is highly inefficient, and even conservative bloggers have failed to have their webpages unblocked by lodging complaints.³² Moreover, the dispute process requires the website owner to disclose his or her personal information and accept responsibility for any misconduct in the future, a commitment that few are willing to make given the risk of severe punishment.

Since taking office, the administration of President Hassan Rouhani has sought to assume more direct control over ICT policy in Iran. However, such moves have been met with fierce opposition from hardliners. Sadeq Larijani, head of Iran's judiciary, indirectly criticized Rouhani's internet policies, warning that Iranian authorities should be cautious about issues relating to communication, cyberspace, and cultural affairs. Larijani warned politicians against employing excited or emotional language on these issues. He emphasized that the main decision-maker regarding internet censorship in Iran is the CDICC, not the government, and highlighted that the law determines which websites and services must be blocked.³³

Such reactions have prevented Rouhani from achieving any broad policy change, though he has been able to achieve some limited successes. For instance, Rouhani oversaw a change in the voting procedure by which the CDICC blocks websites. Previously, the decision to block a website or service required the support of just 5 members of the committee in a vote, but now an absolute majority of all 13 members is required.³⁴ Such a change gives more power to Rouhani's administration as the majority of its 13 members are government ministers.

Content Removal

Aside from filtering, Iran also employs administrative measures to remove unwanted content from the web. Website owners must register their sites with the Ministry of Culture and are then subject to requests to remove particular posts deemed unacceptable by the government. The 2009 Computer Crime Law (CCL) makes service providers, such as blogging platforms, responsible for any content that appears on their sites. This has led to the suspension of blogs or shuttering of news websites hosted on platforms inside Iran, under orders from government officials. The CCL also specifies violations that might result in a website being marked for filtering. These are defined very broadly and range from insulting religious figures and government officials to distributing pornographic content and the use of illegal circumvention tools.³⁵

31 Small Media, *Iranian Internet Infrastructure and Policy Report*, February-March 2013, 3, <http://bit.ly/1ZE5sHD>; Refugee Review Tribunal Australia, "RRT Research Response," May 29, 2008, <http://1.usa.gov/1LOJSMr>.

32 "On filtering of Ahestan," [in Farsi] *Ahestan* (blog), January 15, 2010, <http://ahestan.wordpress.com/2010/01/15/ahestan>.

33 "Larijani criticizes Rouhani over Internet policies," [in Farsi] *BBC Persian*, accessed March 29, 2015, <http://bbc.in/1OwuSn1>.

34 "The monopoly of filtering decisions by 5 individuals has been broken," [in Farsi] *ITMen*, accessed March 29, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1hEO03A>.

35 "Islamic Republic of Iran: Computer Crimes Law," Article 19, 2012, [https://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/2921/12-01-30-FINAL-iran-WEB\[4\].pdf](https://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/2921/12-01-30-FINAL-iran-WEB[4].pdf), and "12 members of Committee in Charge of Determining Unauthorized Sites," [in Farsi] *Weblognews*, December 16, 2009, <http://bit.ly/1Owwpcu>.

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While complaints about censorship have typically come from reformist and independent media, activists from semiofficial news agencies and conservative websites appear to have been contacted by the CDICC and asked to “either remove specific text from their website or risk filtering.” Critics say the committee does not have the jurisdiction to deal directly with websites and news agencies that are licensed by the Press Supervisory Board.³⁶

Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation

Self-censorship is extensive, particularly on political matters. Widespread arrests and harsh sentences meted out to reporters and activists after the 2009 elections, as well as perceptions of pervasive surveillance, have increased fear among online journalists and bloggers. Many either abandoned their online activities or used pseudonyms, resulting in a palpable drop in the amount of original content being produced by users based inside the country. However, the situation slightly improved after Rouhani assumed the presidency, especially among reformist journalists who advocated for him. Nevertheless, the same restrictions of the pre-Rouhani era are still in place, and journalists continue to be prosecuted.

In addition to filtering, censorship, and intimidation, the state counters critical content and online organizing efforts by extending regime propaganda into the digital sphere. There are at least 400 news websites either directly or indirectly supported by the state. They seek to set the agenda by providing progovernment commentary or publishing rumors. There have also been a large number of government-backed initiatives to promote blogging among its supporters and members of the Basij paramilitary group.³⁷

Furthermore, the majority of independent content producers lack the financial resources to operate in such a hostile environment. The online advertising market in Iran is exclusively limited to apolitical and progovernment websites. Even businesses based outside Iran avoid political websites to maintain trading relationships with the country. Although the United States adjusted its sanctions against Iran to enable American internet companies to provide services to Iranian users, Google Advertising does not recognize Persian as one of the languages in its system, disadvantaging Persian content producers.³⁸ Any Iranian-linked company or individual who wishes to use Google AdSense must apply for a specific license, which is not a convenient process for the majority of Iranian content producers.

In August 2014, Rouhani’s administration announced the creation of the Freedom of Information Commission (FOIC), which will be headed by the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The groundwork for the FOIC was laid during Ahmadinejad’s presidency. It is yet to be seen how FOIC will function in practice, but in theory, the FOIC will allow all Iranians to access public information from all the governmental entities, unless prohibited by law. Also, all organizations that fall under the control of the Supreme Leader, such as the IRGC, must receive the minister’s permission prior to publishing information.³⁹

36 Golnaz Esfandiari, “Even Iran’s Conservative Media Complain Of Filtering,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, June 11, 2013, accessed February 12, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1X4BDOI>.

37 “Computer Crimes in Iran: Risky Online Behaviour,” Article 19, 2015, <https://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/38039/Risky-Online-Behaviour--final-English.pdf>.

38 Jamal Abdi, “Obama Norooz promise a good step, more needed to ensure U.S. not part of ‘Electronic Curtain,’” National Iranian American Council, March 21, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1PtT0px>.

39 “FOIC was formed,” [in Farsi] *Mehrnews*, accessed March 29, 2015, <http://www.mehrnews.com/news/2355295>.

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Iranian authorities actively support Iranian social networks and mobile app developers by offering free bandwidth and hosting, with the aim of attracting Iranian users to these platforms over those based outside of Iran. Currently, there are 20 Iranian social networks operating in the country, but none have become popular.⁴⁰ Efforts to suppress foreign technology suggest a general alignment with the internet policies of China, which has undertaken a similar purge of Western-produced applications, while promoting home-grown variants that appear to be part of an effort to simplify state monitoring of private communications and limit citizens' access to information.

Meanwhile, the Iranian government continued its cat-and-mouse game against the use of circumvention tools during the coverage period. The use of such tools is considered illegal, although many ignore this.⁴¹ According to the most recent statistics, 45 percent of Iranian users utilize VPNs to bypass censorship, and 41 percent use other circumvention methods to access blocked content.⁴²

Digital Activism

Due to the ongoing blocks on Facebook and Twitter, opposition campaigning on Persian social media is limited in reach and scope. However, Facebook remains the most effective platform for the engagement between those based inside and outside of Iran. In February 2015, when Iran's federal prosecutors announced that it was illegal for the media to publish photos or news about former president Mohamed Khatami, Iranians users promptly launched an online campaign titled, "We are Khatami's media," on Facebook, reaching nearly 30,000 "likes" in 24 hours. Many of them published photos of him under multiple hashtags, challenging the official ban.⁴³

Violations of User Rights

An undemocratic legal environment, harsh prison sentences, and rampant surveillance impede the rights of internet users in Iran. Several individuals were imprisoned for nonviolent speech that met the ire of authorities. Cartoonist Atena Farghadani was sentenced to more than 12 years for a YouTube video, eight young Facebook users received a combined 127 years for, and tech bloggers were handed 11 years each. At the same time, authorities have made it more difficult to evade censorship and surveillance by restricting access to popular circumvention tools.

Legal Environment

Iran continues to be an extremely dangerous environment for internet users. Iranian laws heavily restrict what is acceptable speech online and specify harsh punishments for those who deliberately flout restrictions, as well as those who have inadvertently drawn the ire of authorities. The constitution provides for limited freedom of opinion and expression, but numerous, haphazardly enforced laws restrict these rights in practice. The 2000 Press Law, for example, forbids the publication of

40 "ICT Minister promises to support local social networks,"[in Farsi] *Mehrnews*, accessed on March 29, <http://www.mehrnews.com/news/2379576>.

41 "Bypassing Internet censorship is now allowed,"[in Farsi] *IT Analyze*, accessed February 12, 2014, <http://itanalyze.com/news/2013/04/05/20758.php>.

42 Marc Burleigh, "Iran to crack down on censor-beating software," AFP via *Yahoo! News*, June 10, 2012, <http://yhoo.it/1RIF3mL>.

43 "Iranians defy ban on images of reformist ex-president Khatami," *France24*, February 20, 2015, accessed on May 8, 2015, <http://f24.my/1NdpstL>.

ideas that are contrary to Islamic principles or detrimental to public rights, none of which are clearly defined. The government and judiciary regularly invoke this and other vaguely worded legislation to criminalize critical opinions.

The 2009 CCL outlines punishments for spying, hacking, piracy, phishing, libel, and publishing materials deemed to damage “public morality” or to be a “dissemination of lies.” Punishments are severe and include the death penalty for offenses against public morality and chastity, as well as long prison sentences, draconian fines, and penalties for service providers who fail to enforce government content restrictions.⁴⁴

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Despite President Hassan Rouhani’s progressive views on accessing social networking sites, his voice has remained silent as Iranian internet users faced increasing arrests and severe punishments.⁴⁵ During the coverage period, a number of users were arrested and imprisoned for their online activities, particularly for posts on social media sites that are officially blocked within the country. As of mid-2015, Reporters Without Borders reports that 26 netizens remain imprisoned for online activities.⁴⁶

Among the arrested were bloggers and journalists working at online publications:

- Mohammad Reza Pourshajari (aka Siamak Mehr), a blogger, was detained in September 2014 for criticizing the Islamic Republic and Islam on his blog *Gozaresh be Khaak-e-Iran* (Reports to the Soil of Iran).⁴⁷
- Ali Ghazali, the managing editor of two news websites *Baztab Emrooz* and *Ayandeh Online*, was arrested and charged with “publishing lies with the intent to create public anxiety” in November 2014. Ghazali published articles on alleged government corruption.⁴⁸

Iranian courts also issued draconian prison sentences in an attempt to clamp down on any online content that is critical of the state.

- In August 2014, Iranian cartoonist Atena Farghadani was arrested on charges of insulting state officials and spreading propaganda for posting an image of a parliamentary vote on reproductive rights, in which she depicted members of parliament as animals. She was released in December, only to be rearrested one month later after uploading a video describing the abuse she faced at the hands of prison guards. She was sentenced to more than 12 years in prison in August 2015.⁴⁹
- In July 2014, 8 youths were sentenced by a revolutionary court to a combined 127 years for

44 Islamic Republic of Iran: Computer Crimes Law Article 19, January 30, 2012, [www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/2921/12-01-30-FINAL-iran-WEB\[4\].pdf](http://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/2921/12-01-30-FINAL-iran-WEB[4].pdf).

45 Mahsa Alimardani, “Fear, Love and Iran’s Favorite Internet Enemy (it’s Facebook),” *Global Voices*, July 22, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1JymP1r>.

46 Reporters Without Borders, “2015: Netizens Imprisoned,” 2015, <http://bit.ly/1Vvb1Ge>.

47 Committee to Protect Journalists, “Iran: 30,” in “2014 prison census: 221 journalists jailed worldwide,” December 9, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1zLZ45X>.

48 Committee to Protect Journalists, “Iran: 30,” in “2014 prison census: 221 journalists jailed worldwide,” December 9, 2014.

49 International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, “Iran Sentences Atena Faraghdani to 12.5 Years for Cartoons,” *Global Voices*, June 3, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1ANISIH>.

antigovernment posts on Facebook.⁵⁰ Many of the sentences were reduced in early 2015, although they remain between five and seven years for charges of insulting the Supreme Leader and state officials as well as “propaganda against the state.”⁵¹

- Even apolitical tech bloggers for the Iranian gadget news site Narenji were arrested in 2013 for attempting to overthrow the Iranian regime and sentenced to 11 years each in jail in June 2014.⁵²

In March 2015, the Cyber Intelligence Unit of the IRGC reported that it had arrested 12 individuals and summoned 24 others on charges such as “insulting Islam,” “publishing immoral and corrupt material,” and “encouraging individuals to commit immoral acts.” The arrests came after a surveillance operation in which the IRGC claimed to have analyzed eight million Facebook “likes” to crack down on content that promoted “moral corruption” or Western lifestyles.⁵³ One user, a university student, was reportedly accused of managing some 20 Facebook pages containing “immoral” content.

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

The online sphere is heavily monitored by the state in Iran. Both FATA and the ICT Ministry have announced that they are capable of monitoring all messages sent on messaging apps Viber, Tango, and WhatsApp.⁵⁴ However, it remains unclear how the authorities can technically monitor the content of messages, given that some of these apps encrypt their messages. All platforms and content hosted in Iran are subject to arbitrary requests by various authorities to provide more information on their users. Local equivalents of international platforms do not guarantee an adequate level of protection for users. For instance, a replica of Facebook, Facenama, was hacked, resulting in the leaking of the personal information of all of its users in December 2014.⁵⁵

The expansion of SHOMA further threatens to infringe on users’ privacy in Iran, such as a proposal to require all internet users to log-in with a unique ID to browse the internet. The government claims the IDs are needed to fight corruption;⁵⁶ however, such functionality will also enable the authorities to find out the real identities of online users and target them for their online activities.

The Iranian government can easily block encrypted traffic. In July and August, the Iranian government prevented an estimated 75 percent of the network’s users (about 40,000 daily) from connecting to Tor, an anonymous web-browsing tool used to evade censorship and surveillance.⁵⁷

50 Kashmiri Gander, “Iran sentences eight Facebook activists to total of 127 years in prison for ‘criticizing government,’” Independent, July 14, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iran-sentences-eight-facebook-activists-to-total-of-127-years-in-prison-for-criticising-government-9605284.html>.

51 International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, “Final Verdict: Five to Seven Years for Facebook Users in Iran,” April 25, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1ZE7EyV>.

52 Mahsa Alimardani, “Iran’s Internet Under Hassan Rouhani: Hope and Disillusionment as Narenji Bloggers Face Prison Sentence,” *Global Voices*, June 19, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1pl5uQY>.
Danny O’Brien, “How Iran’s Gadget Bloggers Became Victims of the Revolutionary Guard,” *Deeplinks Blog*, Electronic Frontier Foundation, April 23, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1llrwRF>.

53 International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, “Facebook Users Arrested, Others Will Be Arrested Soon, IRGC Warns,” March 13, 2015, accessed on May 8, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1VT06U4>.

54 “Minister of ICT: the mobile message apps are monitored,” [in Farsi] *ITAnalyze*, accessed on March 29, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1RIG0f1>.

55 “Hacking of Facenama,” [in Farsi] *ITIran*, accessed on March 29, 2015, <http://news.parseek.com/Url?id=10143840>.

56 “New regulations passed by the SCC,” [in Farsi] *ITAnalyze*, accessed on March 29, 2015, <http://itanalyze.com/news/2014/09/09/25909.php>.

57 Kyle Bowen and James Marchant, “Internet Censorship in Iran: Preventative, Interceptive, and Reactive,” in

Intimidation and Violence

Extralegal intimidation and violence by state authorities is prevalent in Iran. In 2012, blogger Sattar Beheshti was killed while in prison. Groups such as the IRGC are known to pressure social media users to delete content. For example, the IRGC announced in February 2015 that it had deleted 130 Facebook pages managed by 36 individuals since September 2014, which observers believe were deleted by the page owners while under coercion, given that Facebook does not have a relationship with the Iranian government.⁵⁸

Technical Attacks

Hacking continues to be the most popular tool at the hands of Iranian authorities to target Iranian activists and foreign governments alike. In mid-2014, the network security group FireEye published a comprehensive report on "Operation Saffron Rose," a hacking operation by the Iranian hacker group "Ajax Security Team." According to the report, hackers have quickly advanced from website defacements and DDoS attacks to "malware-based espionage." The hacking team has also created decoy installers for various circumvention tools, including Ultrasurf, Gerdoo VPN, Psiphon and Proxifier, thereby targeting Iranian users as well as foreign entities.⁵⁹

Revolution Decoded: Iran's Digital Landscape, Small Media, 2014/2015, <http://bit.ly/1lDomy>.

58 International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, "Iran's IRGC Intensifies Crackdown on Facebook Users with 12 Arrests and 24 Summonses," February 5, 2015, accessed on May 8, 2015, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2015/02/facebook-arrests/>.

59 Nart Villeneuve, et al., *Operation Saffron Eye*, FireEye, May 3, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1jAyyGX>.