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ABSTRACT

ICTs represent a source for emancipation among the citizens of repressive regimes as evidenced by the growth of websites, blogging, social networking and text messaging in countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, these ICTs are heavily filtered in both countries. We examine the justifications offered by authorities for this censorship. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, we demonstrate that the claims fail Habermas's four part validity test and are better understood as ideology. We argue that ICT filtering is implemented to serve the political agendas of small but powerful Islamic elites in order to undermine citizens' capacities to pursue their democratic goals.

Keywords
Internet filtering, ideology, critical discourse analysis, Habermas, critical theory, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Middle East

INTRODUCTION

ICT development in the Islamic countries of the Middle East[1] has been pursued in two distinct ways. One path has been characterized by a massive investment in infrastructure, liberalization of state-owned telecommunications and a fairly "hands-off" approach to ICT regulation (Shirazi 2008.) This has been the approach of countries such as Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) The second path, pursued by countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, has been far more restrictive including the significant limitations on access to and use by citizens of new information technologies. These governments have attributed "non-Islamic" values to ICTs in order to rationalize restrictions on the ability of citizens to use these technologies to their full extent. It is this second path that we investigate in this paper. We argue that the rationales employed to justify these restrictions fail Habermas's four part validity claims test (Cukier, Ngwenyama, Bauer and Middleton, 2008) and are better understood as ideology (Stahl, 2007.) We suggest that these ICT restrictions are implemented to serve the political agendas of small but powerful Islamic elites in order to undermine citizens' capacities to pursue their democratic goals.

Millions of Iranian and Saudi citizens use ICTs to communicate, educate and organise but they are hampered in these efforts. There are several ways their governments restrict their access to and use of ICTs (usually referred to as "filtering.") Filtering involves censorship through the application of restrictions on Internet traffic such as technical blocking, search result removals, website removal ("takedown") and induced self-censorship (ONI 2009). The Open Net Initiative (ONI) tracks the state of filtering in Iran and Saudi Arabia according to five different categories, from *no evidence of filtering* to *pervasive filtering*. Table 1 summarizes the state of ICT filtering in Iran. Iran demands Internet content-providers to fulfill two complementary sets of requirements: they must produce content within state-defined objectives and they must refrain from producing state-defined types of "illegal material" (ONI 2007a). Similarly, the Saudi Arabian monarchy places heavy controls on the use of ICTs focusing particularly on the prevention of alternative Islamic religious views and opposing political views. Interestingly, the Arab television network Al Jezeera as well certain Arab-language news sites are blocked while international media including the Israeli daily Haaretz are not (ONI 2007b). Saudi ICT content is regulated by edicts from 2001 and 2006 that articulate regulation to prevent harm to "Islamic" values, the promote public "decency" and undermine "terrorist" activity (ONI 2007b). Table 2 summarizes the state of ICT filtering in Saudi Arabia.

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[1] We exclude Israel from this examination of ICT development in the Middle East as our focus in this research is exclusively on Islamic states.

FILTERING	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political					●
Social					●
Conflict/ security				●	
Internet tools					●

Table 1: The state of Internet filtering in Iran. Source: ONI (2007a)

FILTERING	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political			●		
Social					●
Conflict/ security			●		
Internet tools				●	

Table 2: The state of Internet filtering in Saudi Arabia. Source: ONI (2007b)

Our paper is organized as follows. First, we introduce the theoretical underpinning of our research. We briefly overview critical research and its twin concerns of emancipation and ideology. Next, we provide examples in a Middle Eastern context of the relationship between ICTs and emancipation. Third, we apply Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to a consideration of the validity claims made to justify internet filtering in Iran and Saudi Arabia. We argue that the validity claims test is inadequate to explain the justifications for filtering and offer an interpretation using the lens of ideology.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

We ground our examination of filtering in the Middle East within the critical research tradition. Critical research has been recognized as a third research paradigm, after positivist and interpretivist research (Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991; Stahl, 2008). A primary goal of the critical research paradigm is to free citizens from "sources of domination, alienation, exploitation and repression by critiquing the existing social structure with the intent of changing it" (Gioia and Pitre, 1990: 588). A key characteristic of the paradigm is its emphasis on ***emancipation*** (Stahl, 2007) understood as freedom from "repressive social and ideological conditions" (Hirschheim and Klein, 1994:87). The emancipatory capacities of ICTs has been elucidated in *inter alia* Hirschheim and Klein, 1994; Klein and Meyers 1999; Ngwenyama, 1991; Silva, 2007; and Stahl, 2008. Consistent across these works is the characterization of emancipation as the transcendence by humans of constraints imposed by external factors.

Ideology is another fundamental aspect of critical theory (Stahl, 2007). Ideology provides a warped lens through which idea systems obscure the present by focussing on the past (Mannheim, 1931) such that elites are positioned to exercise "power, domination and exploitation" (Fairclough, 2003:9) Ideologies can limit the ability of individuals to perceive the real world; therefore, they become counter-forces to emancipation (Stahl 2007). In other words, ideologies distort communication. Hirschheim and Klein (1994) argue that one of the main sources of communication distortions (emanating from the social context) is the information-processing biases exerted by authorities and other powerful actors. These distortions hide privileged

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interests and power through expressions that portray a state of affairs as either natural (therefore unavoidable) or just (therefore desirable) when, in fact, it is neither.

Included within the critical research paradigm is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is a methodology for investigating the use of language and its implication for emancipation. It interrogates texts in order to understand deep structure, systematic communicative distortions and power-relations that underline discourse (Cukier et al., 2008). Dellinger (1995) argues that CDA has made the study of language into an interdisciplinary tool and can be used by scholars with various backgrounds. Most significantly, it offers the opportunity to adopt a social perspective in the cross-cultural study of media texts. Cukier et al. (2008) use Habermas's discourse theory for validity of claims by adapting CDA methodology to four main components of the Habermasian theory of communicative action (Habermas, 2001) namely *comprehensibility, truth*, *legitimacy*, and *sincerity*. These elements are used to construct a framework for analyzing empirical observations within the context of speech and text communications.

The *comprehensibility* claim deals with the pragmatics of language in terms of syntax and symbolic representation. Comprehensibility involves asking "is what is said audible? legible? intelligible?" (Cukier et al 2008: 179.) The *truth claim* is concerned with whether statements are factual or can be refuted. The chief concern is misrepresentation. The *legitimacy* claim addresses the norms and social context embedded in the claims. Legitimacy is established if different voices are accommodated in debate rather than suppressed. S*incerity* deals with examining the consistency of the claim (i.e. what is said is what is meant). Stahl (2007) emphasizes the importance of focusing on language when investigating the link between ideology and ICTs. For example, metaphors can be employed to advance a particular point of view and obscure, or ignore equally valid alternate perspectives. Metaphors can "take on a life of their own ... [and] be turned into reifications." (p. 40).

We use CDA to examine the explanations for restrictions on ICTs in the Middle East. First, we examine the emancipatory role of ICTs in the life of citizens living in the repressive Middle Eastern societies of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Next, we apply Habermas's four part validity test (Cukier et al 2008) to investigate the justifications offered for ICT filtering. Then argue for the use of ideology as a more appropriate lens for explaining the filtering actions of these two countries.

ICTS AND EMANCIPATION

Iranian and Saudi Arabian citizens use ICTs to overcome the constraints imposed upon them by their governments. In this section we show how websites, social networking, text messaging and web logging ("blogging") help citizens to free themselves "to realize their full potential" (Klein and Huynh, 2004:163). We also provide evidence of how the governments filter these activities.

Websites: Websites provide an opportunity for educating, communicating and rallying collective action. As a tool to promote emancipation, websites have had particular significance for Iranian women's efforts to overcome their state of legally sanctioned repression. Many women, individually and in groups, are attempting to redress the imbalance of laws which discriminate against women (Amnesty International, 2008). Of particular note is the use of websites in support of the *One Million Signatures Demanding Changes to Discriminatory Laws* campaign. Launched in 2006, the campaign's objective was to obtain one million signatures on a petition to the Iranian Parliament asking for the reform of the current laws. One of the main goals of the campaign is to educate citizens, and in particular women, about the negative impact of these discriminatory laws on the lives of women and society as a whole. The campaign has highlighted discrimination against women in marriage, divorce, inheritance, criminal law, and citizenship.[2] The online campaign has attracted many people to its cause and been supported by many other websites and weblogs both within and outside Iran. However, the website *Change for Equality*[3], which processes the online petition for this campaign has been filtered by Iranian officials. By November 2008, the website had been interfered with 17 times (Change for Equality, 2008).

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[2] According to the Iranian Islamic constitution a woman is only recognized as a citizen once she is a married. For more information please visit: http://www.change4equality.com/english/spip.php?article41
[3] http://www.campaignforequality.info/english/

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Social networking: Social networks including music sharing websites are another example of how ICTs are used to overcome the barriers imposed by Islamist regimes in the Middle East. Young musicians in both Saudi Arabia and Iran have circumvented restrictions on musical performances by accessing sites like MySpace[TM] and YouTube[TM]. For example, four female college students from Saudi Arabia challenged musical taboos by uploading their heavy metal rock band *Accolade*'s first single "Pinocchio"[4]. Thousands of Saudi citizens have downloaded the track (Worth, 2008). While this is the first time that an all-girl rock band from Saudi Arabia has ventured into cyberspace, Iran's underground music scene has been online since 2005. *Kiosk*[5], a well known Iranian band, has posted their banned music on YouTube[TM]. Their lyrics express the growing frustration, particularly among the younger generation, with the political and economic situation in Iran (Bahmani 2005).

Weblogging ("Blogging"): Blogging helps to convert a single-voiced society into a multi-voice digital community. It provides a platform for a variety of modes of personal expression that are not always accessible in repressive societies. Blogging in Iran has also fostered an alternative way of accessing free information, disseminating opinions, thoughts and ideas, and organizing social and political events. These emancipatory features were particularly important at a time when there occurred a massive shut-down of reformist newspapers by the authorities. Iranian citizens were challenged to find unrestrained/uncontrolled sources of information and turned to blogs to fill their knowledge gaps (Sokooti, 2002) . Blogging in Iran is considered a way of practicing democracy in a virtual space (Hacker and Van Dijk, 2000) and has become a new form of mass media among the younger generation (Alterman, 2005).

Text messaging: SMS text messaging is another widely used ICT both on computers and, increasingly, cell phones. SMS is an inexpensive means of personal communication, for entertainment, sending and receiving prohibited news, and as a forum for political debates particularly among the younger generation. Cell phones have also been shown to be instrumental to political mobilization activities (Lallana, 2004; Surarez , 2005). The social, religious and cultural restrictions imposed on young people's activities, such as social gatherings among boys and girls in public spaces in Iran and Saudi Arabia, make this ICT a particularly popular tool among millions of citizens (ITU 2008). This emancipatory characteristic of SMS technology was demonstrated in the Iranian 2006 presidential campaign. Young Iranians used SMS to advocate boycotting the election and to campaign for opposition candidates. "Hardliners" in the government responded to these initiatives with appeals to the Ministry of Justice to ban the medium. This led to the current restrictions on SMS usage in Iran. Every cell phone owner in Iran is required to submit to security checks by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) to receive clearance to use SMS services (NCRI, 2008). What is unclear is the extent to which the authorities are able to actively monitor the SMS traffic which is estimated to average eighty million exchanges per day (Payvand, 2008).

We demonstrated in this section that ICTs play a significant role in facilitating the emancipation of repressed citizens in Iran and Saudi Arabia. We now turn to an examination of the justification for filtering these ICTs first by applying Habermas's validity test and then arguing for the lens of ideology as more useful.

EXAMINING VALIDITY CLAIMS FOR FILTERING ICTS

Authorities generally justify filtering ICTs by emphasizing the desire to protect the citizenry from negative external influences. Iranian authorities have branded as "Internet imperialism" e-mail technologies, search engines such as Yahoo [TM] and Google [TM], certain foreign and Farsi-language news agencies, websites, and popular social-networking sites such as Facebook[TM] and YouTube [TM.]. These various services are deemed "anti-religious" and "anti-Iranian" and, especially troublesome, are said to be aimed at fomenting a "velvet revolution[6]". Furthermore, Iran's Minister of Education, the police and the Revolutionary Guard (Iran's military) declared ICT tools and services such as the Internet, weblogs, websites, SMS and Bluetooth to be "destructive" and "tools of media warfare" and more dangerous than addiction (Rafizadeh, 2008a, 2008b, Najibullah, 2008). In 2004, Saudi Arabia's highest religious

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[4] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrfEKnnjvCY;
http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofileandfriendID=428696521
[5] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6ZM1Du_zYY
[6] "Velvet revolution" is the term used popularly in the West to describe the non-violent overthrow of the Communist regime in the former Czechoslovakia. No kind of revolution is desired by the elites of any authoritarian regimes. Therefore, this term of western approbation serves as a metaphor for "unislamic" influences in the Middle Eastern context.

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authority issued an edict barring the use of cell phones with built-in cameras, blaming them for "spreading obscenity in Muslim society" (Shihri, 2004).

The claims offered for filtering ICTs by the governments of Iran and Saudi Arabia fail the four part validity test previously described. As Table 3 illustrates, the authorities' justifications are not comprehensible, truthful, legitimate nor sincere. We use an example from each category to briefly illustrate our assertions. The *comprehensibility* claim asks *is the communication sufficiently intelligible? ICTs including various email system*s, search engines such as Google™ and Yahoo™, and western news agencies are filtered in the name of preventing revolution. We argue that this is a distortion. These claims are not made to achieve mutual understanding nor collaboration. Rather the claims are made in order to justify power dominance. The *truth* claim asks *what arguments and evidence are provided to support a claim?* Authorities claim that ICTs are destructive tools which harm Islamic values. This distortion is relies on, for example, misrepresentations of the technologies and a uniform representation of what constitutes Islam (despite the presence of minority traditions). Therefore, the claims are not truthful. The *legitimacy* claim asks *in whose interests* filtering occurs. ICTs are filtered to protect populations from "imperialist" and "western" tools that "threaten national security." We argue that this is a distortion that reflects the power desires of unelected officials particularly the judiciary, religious leaders and the military who work whose censoring efforts are used to promote their own power at the expense of citizens' freedom. Last, the *sincerity* claim asks how the rhetoric of the claims, especially the *use of metaphors and descriptors*, promotes or undermines understanding. Authorities have claimed that the internet, blogs, websites, SMS and other forms of ICTs pose more dangers than addiction. This approach obscures the question of the ethics of filtering ICTs by suggesting that ICTs present physical as well as moral dangers to the populace.

Guiding Questions to identify Validity Claims		Claims	Potential distortion
Comprehensibility			**Confusion**
C1.	Is the communication sufficiently intelligible?	Email systems, Yahoo™, Google™, search engines, and news agencies promote "velvet revolution"	Claims are not made to reach mutual understanding with others, nor to collaborate. Claims are made to justify power dominance.
C2.	Is the communication complete?		It is one-way communication from the ones that order to the ones that are expected to obey
C3.	Is the level of detail too burdensome for the reader or hearer?	ICTs are anti religious (Islamic Shi'a)	Oppressive for religious minorities (non Islamic Shi'a) and for those with "modern" interpretations of Islam
Truth			**Misrepresentation**
T1.	What is said about the technology?	ICTs are destructive tools and harmful to Islamic values	ICTs should be adapted to political Islamic Ideology
T2.	Are the issues and options clearly defined?		Falsehoods are presented as fact
T3.	What benefits have been identified and assessed?	ICTs are harmful to Islamic values	Islamic values are the cornerstone of ICT development
T4.	What evidence has been provided to support these arguments?		Citizens' rights to access and disseminate information freely is suppressed
T5.	Has the relevant information been communicated without distortion or omission?		Five million Internet sites, search engines and weblogs are filtered without notice or specific explanation

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T6.	Are there ideological claims which are unexamined?	ICTs infuse Western culture and ideology in to the preferred Islamic context	Islamic ideology benefits interest groups in power
Legitimacy			**Illegitimacy**
L1.	Who is speaking, who is silent, what are their interests?	Internet is an imperialistic tool harmful to national security	Unelected officials, judiciary, military, religious leaders
L2.	What is not said about the technology?		Citizens' rights to freedom of expression
L3.	What is assumed or implied?		ICTs are harmful to Islamic values and Islamic values equal national security
L4.	What is missing or suppressed in the discourse?		Citizens' rights, alternate perspectives
L5.	How are the decisions legitimized?		Decisions are made by illegitimate sources of power (military, unelected officials, religious leaders)
L6.	Who is involved? Who is not involved?		Conservative hardliners and other interest groups in power are involved, however public opinion, especially opposing opinion, is not involved
L7.	What are the stakes and interests involved or excluded?		Excludes human rights activists, ethnic minorities, NGOs, women's rights groups, political parties, young people, religious moderates and religious minorities
Sincerity: Metaphors and Descriptors			**False assurance**
S1.	Do metaphors and connotative words promote or suppress understanding?	Internet, weblogs, websites, SMS and Bluetooth are posing more dangers than addiction	"Addiction" suggests that ICTs are morally if not physically dangerous thus obscuring the questionable morality of filtering ICTs
S2.	Do metaphors and connotative words create false assurances?		"Danger" suggests that state interference is for the good of the population and obscures the dominance of elite interests in suppressing dissent

Table 3: Validity claims and their potential distortions (adapted from Cukier et al. 2004, 2008 and Stahl, 2007).

The cumulative evidence suggests that the authorities' rationales for filtering ICTs fails the four part validity test. We argue that the rationale for filtering is better understood as an exercise of ideology.

FILTERING AS AN EXERCISE IN IDEOLOGY

The use of metaphors and jargon such as "enemies", "addiction", "anti-religious", "Internet Imperialism", "velvet revolution" and "media warfare" are used as a pretext for imposing heavy Internet-filtering aimed at the over 21 million Internet users in Iran. Agence France Presse (AFP, 2008) reported that officials in the Iranian judiciary claimed to have successfully blocked access to over five-million Internet sites whose content was deemed "immoral" and "anti-social". These officials claim that "enemies" use the Internet to assault citizen's "religious identity" and inflict social, political, economic and moral damage with a magnitude larger than the damage caused by satellite television networks. According to the AFP report, officials have ordered all ISPs to block access to

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political, human and women's rights websites along with blogs expressing dissent or deemed to be pornographic or anti-Islamic. The act of observing "disturbing" materials published on the Internet is equated to, for example, hatred against race, gender and other minorities, religious fundamentalism, fraud, child abuse, terrorism and so on. Authorities use this rhetoric to justify filtering sites operated by women activists, religious and ethnic minorities, political parties, NGOs and other marginalized groups thus preventing the citizenry using ICTs to communicate, educate and collaborate.

The government of Iran frames regulations to systematize control and management of Internet activity. They simultaneously encourage ISPs to promote "genuine Islamic culture" while warning against fomenting social discord or encouraging dissent against state interests. For example, sentences between three months and one year are handed to citizens who "undertake any form of propaganda against the state" while leaving "propaganda" undefined (Freedom House, 2008). Similarly, the Saudi authorities impose harsh measures that, when coupled with heavy self-censorship, create an environment in which the government reinforced by allied clerics are able to overcome all attempts by journalists to exercise their severely limited freedom of action. Criticism of the Saudi royal family and the religious authorities is forbidden, and press offences (print and online) are punishable by fines and imprisonment (ONI 2007b).

Iran and Saudi Arabia not only filter a wide range of topics, but also block a large amount of content related to those topics, or any critique of status quo that is branded as being on the side of "enemies". Since the Islamic revolution in Iran, the word "enemy" has been extended to a long list of countries with the primary targets being the USA and Israel. However, the enemies list includes almost any country that opposes the Iranian government's anti-human rights activities and their apparent nuclear ambitions. Limbert (2008) points out that the government of Iran considers itself surrounded by hostile American, Arab, Turkish, and Sunni forces, all determined to bring about its downfall. Accusations about being agents of "enemies" are normally used to silence critics of the privileged elites – an issue that has been addressed by thousands of bloggers.

We can understand the extent to which ideology underpins the justification for filtering through a consideration of how the term "Islamic value" has come to mean "political agenda." By linking Internet technology as a whole with political Islam as an ideology, the use of ICTs for emancipation through mutual understanding and collaboration (Klein and Huynh 2004) becomes a power-dominated communication (Cukier et al 2008). This power dominated communication emphasizes one-way communication between the ones that command (military or civil authorities) or demand (religious leaders) and the one that should obey (citizen/adherent). In this way Internet filtering is justified because ICTs undermine "Islamic values" by infusing "Western culture" into Islamic society (Rafizadeh, 2008) and "spreading obscenity in Muslim society" (Shihri, 2004). This rhetorical approach helps to consolidate power in the hands of the authoritarian elites and disenfranchises the citizenry by justifying the restrictions on access to information and freedom of expression. The same rhetoric is used similarly to constrain a wide array of social content and activities including music, film, theater, literature and visual arts.

In the final analysis, the justifications for filtering ICTs are self-reinforcing. The dominant groups filter any site that is deemed challenging to them but argue that such filtering and censorship is necessary to protect the morals of society against aggressors. The prohibitions on and concerns for engaging with information technologies apply to the citizenry but not the elites. For example, Iran's political authorities and religious leaders are themselves trying to use the Internet to influence the populace. Personal websites set up by the President and leading clerics are used to promote their ideas to the public (Najibullah, 2008). This is consistent with an ideological approach to justifications. Given an authoritarian, conservative and repressive interpretation of Islam by the Iranian and Saudi regimes, the justification for protecting the population from the evils of the Internet morph into justifications for their use by the by the elites.

CONCLUSION

The level of interference in the online lives of Iranian and Saudi Arabian citizens has been justified by the rhetoric of their political and religious elites that equate Internet filtering with the protection of "Islamic values." We used Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the validity of these claims by the authorities and demonstrated how the imposed restrictions are motivated by Islamic ideology thus failing the four part validity claims test. Internet filtering in Iran and Saudi Arabia undermines the emancipatory aspect of ICTs and replaces them with a power-dominated communicative context. Thus ideology is a more appropriate lens for considering the justifications offered for ICT filtering by the Iranian and Saudi Arabian authorities. This paper contributes to our understanding of

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the development of ICTs in the Islamic countries of the Middle East, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia. Further, it contributes to an extension of the use of Critical Discourse Analysis to both test for validity claims and to offer an avenue for understanding invalid claims.

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