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The Internet Implication in Expanding Individual Freedom in Authoritarian States

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Abstract

The Internet has been heralded as the media for social revolution. However, the question remains: what impact will the Internet have on freedoms in authoritarian regimes? This paper addresses this question with a focus on Iran. After a background on the Iranian context, the United Nation's Articles on Human Rights are considered in the light of common Internet activities. Government responses to individual and group attempts to restore and grow human rights via the Internet are set out. The implications for Iranians are discussed and conclusions are drawn.

Keywords

Internet, Globalization, Modernization, Iran, Rights

Introduction

Globalization is an important contemporary phenomenon that leads to a changeable and dynamic society (Hanseth and Braa 2000). Globalization is a consequence of modernization, which in turn is a base of social changes (El-Ghanam 2001; Hanseth and Braa 2000). The Internet is one of ICT infrastructures that can symbolize the globalization processes (Hanseth and Braa 2000) by making the world smaller and more accessible (Asgari and Walle 2002). Through the Internet, people can communicate to the entire world as never before. As an entry point to the global world, the Internet is potentially an engine of the global revolution (Asgari and Walle 2002). Particularly, the Internet has the potential to bring modernization to authoritarian countries.

In the authoritarian state, power is concentrated on a person or a group that coerces rather than confer rights upon the nation (Leat 2004; Word iQ 2004). Authoritarian states rejects democracy and other modern institutions in order to oppose liberalism, and the complex set of individual human rights that have developed in liberal democratic regimes (Bonanno 2000). Interaction with liberal democratic regimes is restricted to economic purposes. Modernization, political freedom, and individualism are shunned as citizens are required to obey them politically and economically (Free Papers 2004; Word iQ 2004). In order to maintain control, they suppress social movements that can be a threat to their power (Free Papers 2004; Leat 2004).

The Internet has the potential to increases democracy between people (Goldstein 1999; Kalathil and Taylor 2003; Katz and Ronald 2002). It can inform people more of political, social, and scientific aspects. Hence, it can help people to better perceive political and social situations. It can also change their minds and lead them to have greater political power through information (Katz and Ronald 2002). According to (Moghaddam *et al.* 2004) there has been a transition of power from its original seat in violence, to money and more recently to knowledge. Knowledge is the source of power in the knowledge economy/society. Thus, the Internet with knowledge being shared locally and globally, is a threat to the authoritarian state (Kalathil and Taylor 2003).

This study investigates the impact of the Internet on freedoms in Iran. It does so by firstly providing background information on the Iranian political and social situation. The UN human rights declaration is then introduced as the framework of the subsequent discussion of Iranian rights and freedoms. The discussion of rights and freedoms follows and is supported by empirical evidence gleaned from web publications by Iranians. The impact of the

Internet in Iran in terms of a selection of rights covered by the articles of the declaration of human rights is then argued. The Iranian Regime's responses to the Internet are overviewed. Lastly, conclusions are drawn.

Background on Iran

Iran is located in the eastern part of the Persian Gulf and is the second biggest country in the Middle East - just 16% smaller than Saudi Arabia. With a population of 75 million (SCI 2004), Iran is the most populated country in the Middle East (Mosaic Group 1998; Seifkhani Z 2003). More than half of Iran's population is under the age of 30. Some 80% of the population is educated (SCI 2004). Iran is the centre of Shia in the Islamic world. Since the revolution in 1979, Iran has been governed by Islamic leaders who have restricted the nation in various ways by legislating strict laws originating from Shia. There is no freedom in thoughts, expression, religion, sex, and even selecting clothes. And, there is also no job security especially in the media.

In 1997, the Reformists candidate, Mohammad Khatami, was elected by a large majority (proximately 70%). This suggests that Iranians seeks reform and liberty. The Khatami presidency introduced a movement between intellectuals, journalists, and university students. However, the Conservatives have now restricted activities by banning many newspapers and detaining journalists, students, and intellectuals. As a result, according to Reporters without Borders, Iran is ranked at 160 out of 168 countries for freedom (down from 122 out of 139 countries in 2002) (RSF 2002, 2003) and is called the biggest prison for journalists in the Middle East (Index Online 2004). In addition, Iran is regularly criticized for human rights practices, particularly the treatments of women and children.

However, the Reformists managed to introduce public access to the Internet in 1997. The Internet had been available for academic purposes since 1993 (Rahimi 2003). The first Internet connection in Iran was to BITNET, which belonged to the Institute for Studies in Theoretical Physics and Mathematics (IPM), in 1992. In 1995, this connection had improved to a 128 kbyte/s line and Iran was accepted as a class C node and got 500 IP addresses (Arabshahi 1997; Mosaic Group 1998; Rouhani 2000). IPM was the first Internet service provider, which only provided the Internet to academic institutes, research institutes and some governmental agencies.

With liberalization in 1997, Data Communication of Iran (DCI) and Neda Rayane Co. started to provide the Internet for all purposes including personal and commercial usage (Arabshahi 1997; Mosaic Group 1998; Rouhani 2000). There was a rapid growth in the number of ISPs and ICPs as well as Internet cafés. Even with the return to conservatism and the closing of Internet cafes and ISPs (only 252 of 850 ISPs received licenses (Razavizadeh 2003) the growth of Internet access was the fastest in the Middle East (Pheluin 2004) - with Syria and Arabia Saudi in second and third places. Now, Iran is second only to Israel in the Middle East in term of Internet access (Rahimi 2003). Estimates of the number of internet users range from 4,700,000 (Moetamedi 2004) to 7,000,000 (Jahangard 2003). However, Internet has not developed in other cities as much as Tehran because of poverty and poor communication infrastructures (Rouhani 2000).

UN declaration of human rights

The United Nations General Assembly adopted and proclaimed Resolution 217 A (III) (the declaration of human rights) on 10 December 1948. The preamble to the declaration provides the reasons for the declaration as:

“Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.

Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law.

Whereas it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations.

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of the life in larger freedom

Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in cooperation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedom.

Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realisation of this pledge.” (UNDP 1948) P1

The thirty articles covered by the Declaration cover rights to equality, liberty, freedoms and redress.

Current study

This paper reports on an investigation of the impact of the Internet on the rights set out in the UN Declaration of Human rights in the Iranian context. The object of the study was to interpolate from the literature that relates to various national contexts (there is a dearth of Iranian publications) for relevance to the Iranian contexts. The premise was that the Internet has the potential to impact on rights, as set out in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Only those rights upon which the Internet has direct bearing were included in the study. These are culture (Article 27), education (Article 26), and free expression (Article 19).

The overall approach to the empirical component of the research was to search the web for information about Internet use in Iran, and to analyse those data using qualitative and interpretist techniques. This was possible because the first author is an Iranian national who lives there still, but was in Australia at the time of writing this paper. Her close attachment to Internet groups inside Iran meant that while it was not possible to verify the material, it was possible to gain a good insight into its authenticity. The ‘native’ perspectives is invaluable in such studies because it brings a lens that may be more relevant to indigenous research (Ho 1998). The major benefit is that concepts can be understood in terms of their implications for the population, rather than in the abstract, as is the case with foreign lens. .

The web-based materials used in the study included blogs, newspaper articles, and web publishing. This was supported by ‘formal’ texts, generally from ‘Western’ cultural perspectives. Analysis of the material required the reading and rereading of the material. The material was organized into sections of related ideas and then reread for further insight. The purpose was to gain an understanding of the ‘western’ literature in terms of the Iranian material and in terms of the first authors experience and early understanding. The Iranian material was also to be understood in terms of the ‘western’ literature. This constant seeking to make sense of the text in order to discover the world view behind it is consistent with Godamer’s (1982) hermeneutic method. However, the interpretist stance taken by the first author acknowledges that, as an Iranian woman, she carries bias. Sucky bias is a common and important aspect of ‘indigenous’ research (Ho, 1998). The major hurdle is for the researcher to be aware of personal bias and prejudice in the research process. The objective being to deal with those biases and prejudices openly and so advise the reader (Ho 1998). The first author came to the study with a stated bias that Iranian individual freedoms should be extended, and that the Internet should be permitted as a relevant tool

Internet and freedom in Iran

The people of Iran, having been deprived of many rights by the regime, seek those rights via the use of the Internet (CNN 2004; Hermida 2002; Rouhani 2000; White 2004). This section outlines the impact of the use of the Internet on the rights to entertainment and social interaction, education and publishing, and the rights and freedoms that they imply. Because weblogging is so important in Iran, it is treated as separately here although it is a part of the right to publish.

1- Cultural freedom

Article 27 implies that ‘everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits’ (UNDP 1948). Various entertainments are not permitted or available in the Islamic society. Iranian youth try to cover the gap by activities in cyberspace. For example, the youth of Iran download music that is not permitted in the society (Hermida 2002). Moreover, the Iranian regime prohibits socializing between the sexes. This is particularly stringently applied to young people. The youth of Iran use public and private chat rooms to meet (virtually) with one another. In fact, chatting is one of the most popular uses of the Internet in Iran; according to Yahoo, two million Iranians log on to just Yahoo Messenger every day (Razavizadeh 2003).

Therefore, the Internet is a means to access culture that is relevant to Internet using Iranians, particularly the young.

2- Educational freedom

Article 27 implies that ‘Everyone has the right to education.Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms’ (UNDP 1948). However, Iranian education system has not evolved for decades and is inadequate to current needs. A lack of up-to-date books, articles and other resources is a major problem. The Internet affords two capabilities for education in Iran. First, the Internet brings much up-to-date technological and scientific information. Second, virtual universities are an opportunity for youth, who may not find the chance of studying in Iran universities (Faramarzian 2003). As an example, students in a girl’s high school in down town of Tehran can describe many complicated mathematic problems that they have learnt from an Iranian professor in one of the USA universities. In addition, many students in art science use the Internet as a good resource since many of books and relics are forbidden in Iran as a result of erotic pictures (Saba 2003).

Therefore, the Internet provides an opportunity to Iranian students to gain education and to access valuable resources for learning.

3- Freedom of expression

Article 27 (UNDP 1948) implies that ‘Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontier’. The Iranian regime strictly controls publishing especially the newspapers. Many Iranians especially youth and journalists, have selected the Internet as a means of publishing freely. Many journalists and authors who are not permitted to work in Iran, use the Internet for e-publishing, which appeals to those who prefer to read news and the analysis of economic and political situations of the country from different viewpoints in cyberspace (Seifkhani Z 2003). Consequently, the number of electronic newspapers and magazines has grown significantly during the last two years (Badie`e 2003; Molayee 2004) and many news portal sites have been created since 1997 (Molayee 2004).

Many e-books have been published on the net without official permission. For example, Akbar Ganji sent his Manifest from prison to the Net. Montazeri, clergyman, published his autobiography on the Net while he was in prison in his home. Abbas Ma`aroofi published electronically his new novel when he did not get permission to publish it in Iran. Iranians have formed several electronic libraries that not only include banned books, but also share censored parts of approved, published books.

Furthermore, the Internet provides the opportunity for women to publish, e.g., Women in Iran and Iranian Feminist Tribune are two of active sites. Iranian women use the Internet to publish and run seminars on their opinions, share their experiences, and protest against abuse of their rights. For example, “Women in Iran” conducted an online seminar on 8th March, International Women’s Day. While many persons registered and attended the online conference, Iranian women meeting physically were arrested in Tehran.

Therefore, the Internet provides a forum for Iranians to read, talk, discuss freely about what ever they like and they are interested in.

4- Weblogging

Weblogging is relevant to both article 27 (culture) and 19 (expression). weblogs are, for many Iranians, the first experience of an open society where they are free to express themselves (CNN 2004; Glaser 2004). The number of Iranian blogs has grown extensively since the 2001 publication of a Persian manual for creating weblogs (Glaser 2004; Molayee 2004; Motallebi 2003). Surprisingly, given that there are only 75,000,000 million Persian speakers (SCI, 2004), Persian language weblogs are the third most common in the world as Table 1 illustrated (blogcensus 2004).

Iranians, in addition, are interested in reading weblogs. With an average of 4 comments per day for each weblog (Motallebi 2003) there is ample evidence of weblog’s popularity.

Table 1 – weblogs ranking based on Language (blogcensus 2004)

Language	Count
English	1133715
Portuguese	77389
Farsi	63178

French	55166
Polish	42585
German	25521
Spanish	21233
Italian	9937
Chinese-big5	8178
Dutch	7357

Most of Iranians weblogs are based on social issues and Iranian culture without considering religion (Hermida 2002). Iranians use blogging to discuss with each other, share their views and knowledge, talk about their ideas and thoughts, and even explain their personal experiences freely (Derakshan 2001-4; Molayee 2004; Motallebi 2003). Weblogging is especially valued by youth and women who have a lot of

taboos in expressing themselves (Motallebi 2003). They often do so under pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Various people have various reasons to weblog.

- Youth and teens weblog because it is more secure than chatting with strangers. weblogs enable individuals to select those they want to add to their friend list for their messages. In addition, as weblogs show, communication between Iranians living abroad and Iranians in Iran established better interaction via weblogs rather than chatting (CNN 2004; Motallebi 2003).
- University lecturers use weblogs as a complementary method to complete their courses (Molayee 2004). Iranian authors have found a place to interact with their books readers and youth while they are not permitted in the society, according to what Moniru Ravanipour, an Iranian author, wrote in her weblogs (Ravanipour 2004).
- Iranian women found a place to talk freely even about taboos such as boyfriends and sex (CNN 2004; Glaser 2004; Hermida 2002). One of the first Iranian women weblogger said, “I could talk very freely and very frankly about things I could never talk about in any other place, about subjects that are banned” (CNN 2004; Hermida 2002).
- Journalists use weblogging to overcome the restrictions on publishing(CNN 2004; Glaser 2004; Hermida 2002; Motallebi 2003). Thus, weblogs are a means of information of critical events in Iran that makes interactivity possible. webloggers talk about technological, literary, economic and political issues in their blogs and many readers refer to them to read their analysis of recent events (CNN 2004; Glaser 2004; Hermida 2002; Molayee 2004; Motallebi 2003).
- Many of them have joined together to publish e-magazine and e-newspapers that have led to the wide spread of e-journalism in Iran (Shokrkah 2003). Various groups grow up around these. For example, Sobhane is a group weblogs that informs readers of the best of weblogs. The prize for the best weblog 2004 went to Malakut, a weblogs Rings as Malakut a ring of Iranian authors who lived out of Iran in different countries.

In some cases, webloggers have joined to achieve targeted social and political goals. An example of a social goal is that at the time of the Bam earthquake, webloggers established a website for assistance and fund raising (Derakshan 2001-4). An example of a political goal that was achieved by webloggers is the case of Sina Motallebi who was arrested for e-publication, and was freed after an e-petition. Upon leaving the country, he said, “The community of bloggers come together and helped me, and spread the news around the Web, and became united. There was a petition with more than 4,000 signatures on one site. And there was coverage of the story in the foreign media” (Glaser 2004). An example of women activities is suspending the death penalty of two women when Iranian feminist associations call for signing petitions for stopping death penalties. As a subsequent of all these, Iranian bloggers believe that they are so effective in real world, when they are united (CNN 2004; Glaser 2004). Thus, weblogs are not just a virtual phenomenon in Tehran but also it is a serious issue that has influenced many aspects of social activities (CNN 2004; Glaser 2004; White 2004).

Therefore, the Internet is an open society for Iranians looking for rights of cultural and publishing freedom.

Regime responses

Although the Iranian regime is opposed to global media such as satellite TV, it accepts that the Internet is essential for academic and economic purposes. Therefore, they allow the use of the Internet for some purposes. For example, economists may use the Internet to access the latest economic news, and students may access technical and academic issues (Saba 2003).

From a social perspective, the regime seeks to control the Internet because it may dilute the culture, and because it enables freedom of expression. Most attempts to control the net rely on filtering. Although it is claimed that only immoral sites are filtered; many political sites and even caricature and joke sites on the black list (Greene 2003). They oblige ISPs to use a content-based filtering model for immoral as well as cultural and political websites. In general, every website that has or may criticize the government is filtered (Goldstein 1999). At first, the number of declared filtered site was 30, but the number of 15,000 sites declared later (Greene 2003), later the figures was increased to more than 100,000 sites (Razavizadeh 2003). It is moreover, standard practice to filter News websites (RSF 2003). The black list also includes, weblogs, and even some religious sites are filtered (BBC News 1999); since there is no freedom even in religion; for instance, Kaafar site is filtered since it has some articles against Islam and some books about the Prophet. There is no single criterion for filtering. For example, people said many sites even educational are filtered just for an image whereas some of them are important academic sites (Rouhani 2000). In addition, people believed that filtering political sites are more important than erotic sites for the government (BBC Interactivity 2004).

Iranian Internet users are, not surprisingly, against filtering. According to a survey in Moj News Agency in 2004, 87% of users are opposed to filtering. The remaining 13% are parents worried about their children's access to the Internet (Moj News Agency 2004). Reasons for opposing filtering include:

- Internet usage should be based upon personal and/or family decision making not the government (Rouhani 2000).
- Internet should be free because its governance is impractical, impossible, or counter-productive (Rouhani 2000).
- People can get what they want in some ways even for Internet (BBC Interactivity 2004; Rouhani 2000).
- Filtering is against human rights (BBC Interactivity 2004). Many Iranians use web-savvy surfers or foreign proxy servers to break filtering. Internet users teach each other how to break filtering via weblogs or email forwarding.

While the Iranians seek to gain their rights through the Internet, and the regime tries to filter it, and the users seek to break or oppose those filters, there is worry about the future of the Internet. This is especially after political changes in Iran (White 2004). Government crackdowns have seen the arrest of e-publisher Sina Motallebi in 2003. Upon his release, Sina Motallebi said that the prosecutor of Tehran, Mortazavi, wanted to make an example of Motallebi to show other webbloggers that weblogging is not free (Glaser 2004). In addition, there are persistent rumors of Internet Police, and users are waiting to see what will happen (Molayee 2004).

Conclusion

Iranian use of the Internet implies that the Internet is effective in expanding their freedom and achieving rights to their own culture (Article 27), education (Article 26), and free expression (Article 19). Because the Internet is seen as a tool to achieve these, the Internet is growing in popularity despite poverty, infrastructure problems and the threat of reprisals.

Iran is one example of an authoritarian state. Problems of absent human rights are common to other authoritarian states. And the Internet has the global impact of bringing the potential for rights to these states as well. Therefore, while this paper has presented the case of Iran, much of its findings are relevant to other authoritarian states.

The main limitation of this paper is that it has focused on the positive aspects rather than on the negative aspects of backlashes and reprisals. While these and their threat are ever-present, they are not the focus that the Iranian users choose. Rather, they choose to see the Internet as a tool in their fight for freedom and rights.

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