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Representation of Iranian Cybersecurity Policy in the National Media

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Abstract. The relevance of the research topic is due to the increased attention to the problems of cybersecurity in the modern world. The purpose of the study is to identify the position of the Iranian authorities on the issue of cybersecurity. The main method of research is content analysis of the Iranian online versions of newspapers, news websites and news agencies publishing information on this topic in Farsi and English. A result of the conducted research made by the authors is the main conclusion that the majority of Iranian information publications focus on the positive aspects of cybersecurity policy aimed at protection against foreign interference in Iran's internal affairs. At the same time, the study has revealed a number of publications that highlight not only the advantages of the Iranian government's cybersecurity policy, but also shortcomings and gaps.

Keywords: The National Information Network, NIN, The Protection Bill, Cyberspace limitations, ICT

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Репрезентация иранской политики кибербезопасности в СМИ Исламской Республики Иран

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Аннотация. Актуальность темы обусловлена повышенным вниманием к проблемам кибербезопасности в современном мире. Цель работы — выявить позицию иранских властей по проблеме кибербезопасности. Основным методом исследования является анализ содержания иранских онлайн-версий газет, новостных веб-сайтов и информационных агентств, публикующих информацию по указанной тематике на персидском и английском языках. В результате авторы делают вывод, что большинство иранских информационных изданий акцентируют внимание на положительных сторонах политики кибербезопасности, направленной на защиту от иностранного вмешательства во внутренние дела Ирана. В то же время в ходе работы удалось выявить ряд публикаций, в которых освещаются не только преимущества политики правительства Ирана в области кибербезопасности, но также недостатки и пробелы.

Ключевые слова: Национальная информационная сеть, НИС, защита информации, ограничения в интернет-пространстве, информационно-коммуникационные технологии, ИКТ

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Информация о финансировании. Статья подготовлена в Государственном академическом университете гуманитарных наук в рамках государственного задания Министерства науки и высшего образования Российской Федерации (тема № FZNF-2020-0001 «Историко-культурные традиции и ценности в контексте глобальной истории»).

Introduction

The overwhelming majority of news and articles in the Iranian media agencies are mainly about the directions of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Hasan Rouhani, Ebrahim Raisi's policy because they contributed a lot to the strategies and projects in the field of cyberspace, cyberattacks from the United States and Israel's side as well as the emergence of the new organizations that control the country's information network.

Previously, the topic of cybersecurity policy, attacks, threats and information warfare was not often seen in the media and was not discussed in more or less secret circles. However, as time passed and the incidents that had occurred, the world began to pay great attention to this and observe with interest. States in such conditions began to pursue technological progress, so as not to become a victim of a cyberattack and be able to commit it by themselves if necessary. Iranian media agencies cover different topics and most of them related to cybersecurity policy of a country. It is one of the thorniest themes in the IRI (the Islamic Republic of Iran) due to the increasing of cyber threats and attacks.

Review of the Iranian Media

The pages of publications create a negative image of the United States, focusing on the cyberattacks (Stuxnet, Flame) committed by them. This image is contrasted with Iran as a country that must improve its cybersecurity strategy to protect its state from external adversaries. "The Iranian leadership should adopt a smart approach in the field of cyber so that in the future, in addition to being in a key and superior position, the cost of conflict and defeat of an enemy can be reduced to a minimum" [1]. The article also provides a diagram of the strategy in the form of an arrow and its main directions. This can be attributed to the additional visual means that have an emotional and psychological impact on readers of the newspaper and reinforces the overall semantic tone of the publication. And at the end of the article, the author emphasizes the non-involvement of Iran in the evil actions of enemies. Everything that the country's leadership implements is only for the good and aimed at protecting national interests. He also mentions words from the Qur'an, emphasizing the country's commitment to the Islamic principles: "If an enemy attacks first, that enemy will definitely be defeated" [1].

At the same time, the publishing house informs about the certain aspects of processes and phenomena, without giving a complete picture of what is happening. Moreover, it did not focus on the government's mistakes in the

field of cybersecurity, but mentioned the difficulties in the IT field, which will be resolved by experts in the offing. Therefore, a reader observes two images: the enemy and the defender. The enemy is primarily the United States and the Zionist regime (Israel), the defender is the Iranian state which is taking measures to ensure cybersecurity of the country. Thus, these images are strongly fixed in the mind of a reader which formulates his attitude towards other states and the regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Another national publication house Donya-e Eqtesad presented an article about the possible threats for cybersecurity in 2022. The author emphasizes the importance of improving cyber environment of companies, firms, financial infrastructures and other important entities because nowadays viruses are able to find any vulnerability in internal networks. “As production supply chains become increasingly automated and rely heavily on the remote access, leaders need to focus on creating a multi-layered cybersecurity strategy that leads to cyber health” [2]. The methods and tools of hackers are always changing and improving, from year to year their skills develop and it will be very hard to defend from them. That’s why it is primarily significant to protect the remote access. For this, the certain cyber hygiene practices and processes must be implemented. It is considered as an efficient medium to maintain cyber health. The media also paid a great attention to the mistakes and blunders of the heads of companies, especially vendors. Taking into account the growing threat of hackers, manufacturers should take care of possible threats and prioritize improving cybersecurity.

Besides that, Donya-e Eqtesad informs the audience about the precarious position of medical institutions. With the advent of coronavirus, the health care system is struggling with full hospitals and the fight against the epidemic. Hackers often demand a ransom by breaking into and stealing important data. In the context of the epidemic, the ransom price has increased significantly and cyberattacks on hospital have begun. Thus, a reader becomes aware of the possible potential threats in 2022 as well as organizations which need to improve their cyber strategy. In addition, the media shows that many organizations in Iran still have problems and gaps in this area, providing comprehensive information about the miscalculations of these companies and evoking in a reader the image of a state that is trying and making efforts to improve the cybersecurity.

The same trend can be seen in the official Iranian media named the IRNA (the Islamic Republic News Agency). It has published an article about the opening of the Virtual Center for Security and Information Sharing (VCSIS) for government and public sector specialists. The publication house describes the advantages of this new entity which is aimed to educate people in cybersecurity field. There they may receive special lectures and training courses.

They placed emphasis on speech of Amir Nazemi (the head of the Information Technology Organization). He noted the importance and key role of the Iranian state in cybersecurity: “One of the questions that was asked of experts in the field of information technology forecasting is the need for government intervention in the field of cybersecurity” [3]. He also paid a reader’s attention to the approaches of the government towards establishment of the new platform. It was created in compliance with the cybersecurity policy. Amir Nazemi also noted the joint work of the public and private sectors and their active interaction on the site of new center. Therefore, the news agency describes only the strong sides of new entity which should ensure the increasing awareness and knowledge of potential cybersecurity problems. The audience observes a positive image of Iranian state that improves and develops the country’s cyber environment.

A significant part of reports, articles and news is also devoted to Iran’s important project in the field of cybersecurity — the National Information Network (NIN). Majority of the National media reveals this topic to readers in detail, as this is an important innovation that can provide the comprehensive safety for internal networks. Most of them are aimed to create a positive perception of local intranet by the audience, emphasizing the advantages for cybersecurity of the country.

For example, the official news agency IRNA has some news articles on cybersecurity policy topic: “Setting up national network of high priority: Iran speaker” which is reflecting a strong and confident position of the government related to their steps towards implementing and improving Iranian independent cyberspace. In particular, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf (Iranian parliament speaker) is the official who explains the approach of the state in its cybersecurity policy. M.B. Ghalibaf described NIN as a pivotal and essential project for the country because “it can help authorities to fight corruption, pursue clarification, and create economic and social justice throughout the IRI entire territory” [4]. Furthermore, in his speech he called the government for much more active measures in order to promote the development of NIN. Therefore, it is clearly seen that the officials of the IRI prioritize and emphasize the importance of elaboration of the digital sphere in the country. The project NIN (National Information Network) is also an attempt to make the country’s cyberspace competitive and exclusively domestic for Iranian users.

The Iranian Students’ News Agency (ISNA) represents news about some changes and improvements in cybersecurity field. The official representatives of the government (for instance, Seyed Ali Yazdikhah) announced about the importance of launching national information network and defending of cyber space from the content which can be harmful for the users, including children: “The Internet is a double-edged sword, it can be both an opportunity and a threat

and harm, as it has hitherto harmed and changed our children's values and lifestyles with the Internet" [5].

In its turn, Tasnim News Agency (TNA) has covered cybersecurity policy of Iranian government and related to this topic cases in its publications. Most of them are informative and reflects the IRI's national cybersecurity strategy positively emphasizing the active role of the government in its development: "Development of ICT (Information and Communications Technology) is high on the agenda of President H. Rouhani's administration" [6]. For instance, a news article "Iran Unveils National Information Network (NIN)" where the agency describes the beginning of functioning of the new Iranian project NIN in ICT field. In this connection Tasnim News used the speeches of the Iranian officials that induce only positive emotions that give hope for the brighter future: "Usage of communications and information technology should pave the way for realization of a knowledge-based society and economy, cultural and scientific development" [6].

Therefore, it is clearly seen how the media agency represents for the Iranians the advantages of the NIN. First of all, it emphasizes the interest of the state in the field of cybersecurity, absence of its indifference as well as focus on the efforts of the state to improve the country's cyber platform. Besides, this new project is aimed to promote development and prosperity in many areas: economy, science and culture. The audience of this news article does not observe the detailed information about the NIN and possible negative consequences for Iranian society after its implementation.

Another article "Special case: Cyberspace is a Threat or Opportunity?" by Tasnim News Agency (TNA) is also describing the advantages of Iranian government's project — National Information Network (NIN). Its implementation will have many positive economic effects such as increasing employment, economic growth and reducing the cost of Internet services. One of the results is to increase the penetration rate and improve the speed and quality of the Internet.

Also, news agencies cover an important topic for users namely the possible enacting of new ordinance. Many news channels wrote about the new legislation "Cyberspace Users Rights Protection and Regulation of Key Online Services" (Siyanat az hoquq-e karboran dar faza-ye majazi) which is also called "Protection Bill". In the light of this Fars News Agency (FNA)'s Science and Development Group published comprehensive report, analyzing the draft plans of the new law.

The previous versions of drafts were much stricter and tougher in terms of the import of electronic and intelligent equipment that implied an installation the unlicensed external utility services by default. For example, the 23th article of the draft claimed the following: "The import of electronic and intelligent equipment that has the installed unlicensed

foreign basic services by default or cannot install the licensed effective domestic basic services by default, and is subject to smuggling regulations” [8]. However, the government decided to change this rule and introduced the new one: the import of intelligence electronic equipment that have installed the unlicensed foreign basic services is not banned but the import duties will be increased by up to 35 %.

Another limitation is connected to advertising in foreign services. According to the previous draft, “any advertisement, promotion and dissemination of foreign basic services through radio, press, publications, news agencies and virtual media and environmental advertising were prohibited” [8]. This restriction faced a backlash and due to this reason, this part of the draft has altered a lot. Now it is limited only for entities which use the government funding. Also, the document paid a great attention to the importance of using licenses. Any invitation or compulsion of Iranian citizens or the IRI residents to use basic foreign services without a license by the authoritative organizations, such as ministries, large companies, schools, universities are prohibited. Violation of this rule can lead to the serious consequences. This comprehensive report of the structure of the new draft and its comparison with the previous one by Fars News Agency (FNA) shows how the government takes measures to implement strict policy in the field of cyberspace after the other large project — the National Information Network (NIN). However, the authorities made a lot of changes in order to soften the main points of the new legislation. Thus, the state makes efforts to restore a positive and kind image of the government after harsh criticism of the new bill. The media agency represented overwhelmed report in details, emphasizing the changes which were made by the state, and taking into account the previous negative public perception of it.

The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) News Agency also paid attention to the possible implementation of the new bill. They published news article with the video where the audience is able to listen to the speech of Mr. Seyed Ali Yazdikhah (the main designer of the parliamentary plan “Organizing Cyberspace” regarding “Cyberspace Users Rights Protection and Regulation of Key Online Services”). He emphasized that the state does not have intention to block social networks, platforms, blogs, etc. The parliament makes efforts to establish rules in the field of cyberspace in order to provide security connection, clean content without any triggers for sparking concerns among the users. The media agency is also referring to speeches of other parliament representatives and high-ranking officials. For example, Iranian representative of the people of Tehran emphasized only positive and strong sides of this new bill: “We believe that strengthening of the domestic social networks has led to more business prosperity and cheaper internet has been provided to the people” [9].

Content analysis of the national media

In this context there were selected publications that directly or indirectly mention the issue of cybersecurity and the issue of Iran’s cyberspace for 2020–2021 (using the Search section on the sites under study, as well as the Google search engine). I identified 624 mentions of this topic in the media during the period of 2020–2021.

This period of time was chosen due to the following factors: the latest changes regarding Iranian cyberspace at the legislative level, which caused a chain reaction in the national media (the new “protection bill” which is hotly debated and face a backlash). In addition, this period makes it possible to identify the most significant and relevant features of the Iranian cybersecurity policy in the national media, taking into account the latest alterations and developments in this area.

The study examined the Iranian online versions of newspapers, news websites and news agencies publishing information in Farsi and English about the cybersecurity policy topic. They are supposed to be one of the most prominent and well-known media in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Due to these reasons, they are chosen to conduct the content analysis. News agencies: Fars News, Tasnim News, IRNA. Newspapers: Hamshahri, Kayhan, Iran Daily, Tehran Times, Shargh.

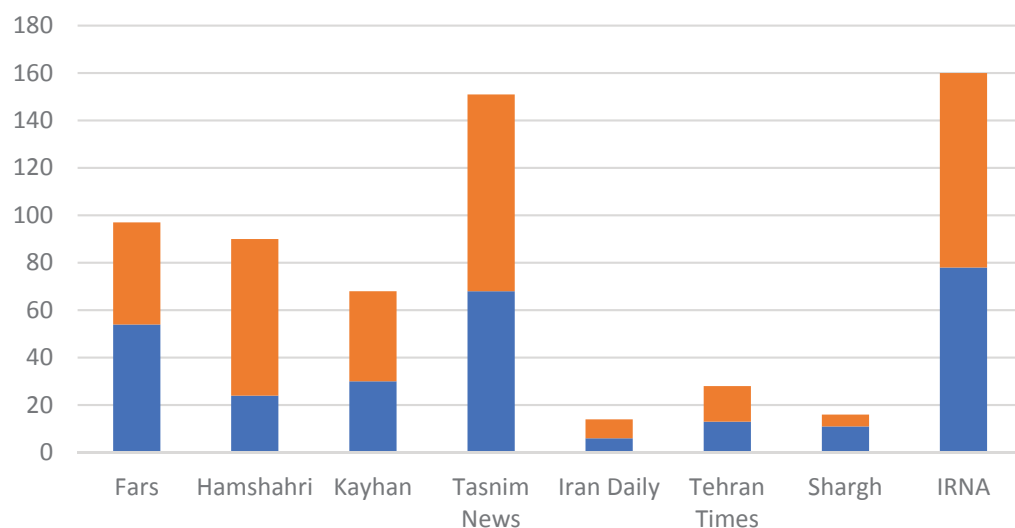
Dynamics of mentions in the national media

Media name	2020	2021	In total
Fars	54	43	97
Hamshahri	24	66	90
Kayhan	30	38	68
Tasnim News	68	83	151
Iran Daily	6	8	14
Tehran Times	13	15	28
Shargh	11	5	16
IRNA	78	82	160

Source: Compiled by the authors

As a result of the analysis of the collected data, one can see a natural increase in the number of mentions of the issue of cybersecurity and cyberspace restrictions in six of the eight reviewed media. In the publications Fars and Shargh, the number of mentions of this topic, on the contrary, decreased in 2021.

The most frequently mentioned topic of cybersecurity and cyberspace restrictions took place in the IRNA (160 mentions in 2 years) and Tasnim News (151 mentions in 2 years). The least mentions of this topic are found in the online newspapers Iran Daily (English newspaper) (14 mentions in 2 years) and Shargh (16 mentions in 2 years). The results show that the number of publications on the topic prevailed on the pages of the national news agencies.



Dynamics of mentions in the national media

Source: Compiled by the authors

The analysis helps us to draw conclusions that most of the publications are informational or research and informational in nature. Absolute majority of them have a neutral or positive modality. The coverage of Iran's cybersecurity policy in the national media is essentially nonjudgmental. The study shows that they mostly often focus on news related to the implementation of the information network and the government's plans "to clear the Internet". In the reviewed articles there are some references to the officials' statements regarding to the paramount importance of improving and maintaining safety in cyberspace.

Conclusion

Cybersecurity policy is widely discussed in the Mass media which is used as an effective tool of the government to influence on the people's mind. Most of news and articles are devoted to the positive sides of cybersecurity policy, emphasizing the protection from foreign interference. The formation of a certain news background and agenda has a great influence on how people perceive the information.

In this work, we have analyzed the following national media: Fars News, Tasnim News, IRNA (news agencies) and newspapers: Hamshahri, Kayhan, Iran Daily, Tehran Times, Shargh for the content of information about the cybersecurity policy of Iran. According to the analysis, this topic is not so often covered in the media. IRNA is the lead agency that publishes articles on this topic. The main criteria were the dynamics of mentions of this topic in the media, which information occasions were prevailed, which data sources were used for obtaining information, as well as determination the ratio of publications and target audience. As a result, we can conclude that the coverage of this topic in the national media is essentially informative and analytical, highlighting important changes in the country's cyberspace and calling for awareness in consuming the content. They mainly focuses on news related to the NIN project (the new possible 2021 bill for users) revealing not only the advantages of the government's cyber security policy, but also the shortcomings and gaps.

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