

Iran - Media Landscape

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Overview

The situation of the media in Iran reflects, to a certain extent, the contradictions of the complex political life and institutional architecture of the Islamic Republic. The absolute authority of the Supreme Leader, at present ayatollah Ali Khamenei, lives

together with elective offices and bodies, such as the President of the Republic - that is also the head of the government - and the parliament. Candidates to such elective positions have to nevertheless go through a vetting process where the main role is played by the Guardian Council, one of the many centers of power directly or indirectly controlled by the Leader himself.

The media are heavily censored and journalists and bloggers face a very high risk of imprisonment for their activity. Iran is at the 165th place in the World Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders in 2017 out of a total of 180 countries. "Iran continues to be one of the world's five biggest prisons for media personnel", says the organisation. All TV and radio stations broadcasting from the country are in the hands of the regime, the control on the activity of the press is very strict and dozens of publications, most of them reformists, have been suppressed over the years. But at the same time new dailies and magazines from the same side of the political spectrum have been created, often replacing with part of the same staff the ones that had been closed. Within the 'red lines' that nobody is allowed to cross - opposition to the system of the Islamic Republic, the Supreme Leader and Islam (according to the interpretation given by the system itself) - the political debate in the press may be surprisingly lively and open and criticism of public figures, including members of the government and of the parliament, is not uncommon. But the boundaries imposed by the law in such cases are uncertain, and allow authorities to intervene with severe measures at their will in case of reporting about sensitive issues.

Other contradictions concern the access to some basic instruments of information. The State has monopoly over all television and radio broadcasting, as stated by article 44 of the Constitution. This activity is managed by the *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting* (IRIB), whose Director General is appointed by the Supreme Leader. But millions of Iranians follow also the programs of foreign-based stations, illegally using TV dishes. Many websites and social media, including Facebook, Twitter and Youtube, are blocked by the authorities, but are used by millions more citizens, including activists and dissidents, that access the banned sites through anti-filter systems. Also the most important officials have profiles on Facebook and Twitter.

Media have always had a fundamental role in Iranian politics, and their fortunes have coincided with those of the political awakenings that have characterised Iranian history since the beginning of the twentieth century. That is since the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911) that saw secular and Marxist groups join forces with part of the Shiite clergy and the merchants of the Bazaar to limit the powers of the Qajar dynasty. It was in those years that Iranians started to use new words like *demokrasi* (democracy), *sosialism* (socialism) and *jomhuri* (republic), while 90 newspapers were founded and became the voices of a free political debate. The names of some of them were particularly meaningful: *Asr-e Now* (The New Era), *Esteqlal* (Independence) and *Eqbal* (Progress). A similar flourishing of publications happened in the years after World War Two and continued up to the new wave of nationalism that brought with it the nationalisation of the oil industry by the government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq in 1951. Iran had arrived to having 300 newspapers, 25 of them dailies, before the coup d'état supported by the United States and Great Britain that overthrew the government of Mossadeq in 1953.

The following repression, especially in the years after the first attempted insurrection by the Islamic movement of Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini in 1963, drastically reduced the press activity. In 1978, at the wake of the revolution, the number of the newspapers had gone down to 100, 23 of which were dailies, in spite of the fact that the population had doubled to 35 million and the literacy rate had increased five times, to over 50 percent. The control of the government over the press had become asphyxiating, to the point that it was an article published on the order of the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, by one of the major newspapers at the time, *Ettela'at* (Information), that provoked the first spark of the big fire. The story, containing false accusations against Ayatollah Khomeini, at the time in exile in Iraq, led to a demonstration against the monarchy in the Shiite holy city of Qom in January 1978. It was the first episode of a movement of protests that in a few months was to engage the whole country in a chain reaction snowball effect.

The fall of the monarchy, in February 1979, marked the beginning of a short season of freedom on the political scene and the

press and saw the number of publications reaching 700. But this 'Spring of Freedom' didn't last long. The Khomeinists, helped also by the emergency situation provoked by the war with Iraq that started in September 1980, soon took full control of power.

Many newspapers were closed, among them those linked to the Marxist and secular factions that had taken part in the revolution but were against the instauration of a clerical system of power. From that time on, the newspapers published in the country are expressions of different factions, but only within the limits and the 'red lines' of the Islamic Republic.

The power of the Supreme Leader - first Khomeini and now Khamenei - who has the final word on all matters regarding the State, reduces the powers of the government and the parliament as well as the media. In 2000 Khamenei forbade the reformists-dominated parliament to consider a new press bill meant to introduce more liberal rules, describing it as a threat to national security. The Leader controls also other centers of power that can prevent the government to implement policies. The result is that the presence of a reformist or moderate president does not guarantee more freedom for the press. It is true, for example, that during the first years of the government of the reformist President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), the country, and with it the media, lived a new season of relative freedom. Hundreds of new publications were licensed and the total circulation increased from 1.5m to 2.9m copies. People were standing in line in front of newsstands in the morning, waiting to see how far the newspapers would push in challenging the system. A symbolic figure of journalism of those days is Akbar Ganji, who on the newspaper *Sobh-e Emrouz* (Today's Morning) published a series of articles accusing ministers of the previous governments of the killings of dozens of dissident writers and activists. But it was also during the presidency of Khatami that the judiciary started a crackdown on the media that led to the closure of dozens of them, after a speech by Khamenei in April 2000 in which the Supreme Leader had accused part of the press of having become "the base of the enemy." Among the many journalists that were arrested there was Ganji, who was sentenced to six years in jail. The publisher of *Sobh-e Emrouz*, Said Hajjarian, a close ally of President Khatami, was shot in the head in full daylight in the center of Tehran, and as a consequence of his injuries remained semi-paralyzed.

The pressure on reformist newspapers, accompanied by the suspension of public funding for some of them, continued in the eight years of the ultra-conservative President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. After the election of the moderate Hassan Rouhani, in 2013, only some restrictions have been loosened, with the reopening of part of these publications. But according to the reports of the United Nations on the situation of human rights in Iran, his administration has not yet been able to bring about a significant improvement in freedom of expression. This is in spite of the efforts for a reduction of the press restrictions advocated by the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Ali Jannati, before resigning his post in 2015. According to a report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights, Ahmed Shaheed, submitted in September 2016, "at least 14 journalists and 15 bloggers and social media activists were reportedly either in detention or sentenced for their peaceful activities as of July 2016, and reports suggest that many others are subjected to interrogations, surveillance and other forms of harassment and intimidation."

With the newspapers used as catalysts and voices of the main factions, the journalists that work in the printed media often find themselves in the role of political activists. But the same happens in the news agencies, whose number has had an exponential growth in the last 15-20 years, since the different groups inside the system have resorted also to this kind of tools for their propaganda.

Media

Print

Iran has about 140 newspapers publishing daily. These include both national and local newspapers which range in purpose and content: While most focus on news and political analyses, some are focused on sports, economics or entertainment. But the significant ones are not more than a dozen, of which most are in Farsi language and four are in English.

There are no official figures on circulation. The biggest selling paper is considered to be *Jam-e Jam*, owned by the *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB)*, that reflects the conservative approach of the publisher. According to a report of the Boston-based website *Tehran Bureau*, *Jam-e Jam* was selling 450,000 copies in 2009. A popularity explained in part by its availability: The paper prints in several cities across Iran and therefore gets the copies to newsstands before competing Tehran-based publications are delivered to provincial cities.

Keyhan (Universe), one of the most conservative newspapers, is run by the office of the Supreme Leader, who appoints the Editor-in-chief, currently Hossein Shariatmadari. Believed to have a circulation between 70,000 and 100,000 copies, the newspaper is read by a conservative, religious audience and consistently keeps a hard line on domestic and foreign policy issues. It has often published articles attacking politicians or journalists of different factions accused of working for foreign intelligence agencies. There is also an English version of the paper, *Keyhan International*, based mostly on news and reports from foreign agencies, apart from the editorials that are normally translated from Farsi. *Keyhan* must not be confused with *Keyhan London*, a monarchist weekly published in the UK and with a small circulation, which was founded after the 1979 revolution. *Jomhuri-ye Eslami* (Islamic Republic) is another conservative newspaper considered to be closely linked to the Supreme Leader. But its influence does not match up to *Keyhan*.

Resalat (Message), is another important conservative newspaper, with strong links to the traditional Bazaar merchants. It reflects the views of the conservative Islamic Coalition Party and the Islamic Association of Engineers. Another conservative newspaper, in English, is *Tehran Times*, which was founded in 1979 immediately after the revolution and is affiliated with the Islamic Propagation Organisation. Its circulation does not surpass 15,000 copies.

Among what are considered as the 'centrist', or moderate-conservative, newspapers there is *Hamshahri* (The Fellow Citizen), published by the Municipality of Tehran, with a circulation of 350,000 copies. Founded during the presidency of Rafsanjani by the mayor at the time, Gholamhossein Karbashi, who was one of Rafsanjani's closest allies, *Hamshahri* is the most read newspaper in the capital. According to a survey of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, in 2014 it was the favorite publication for 44.1 percent of the readers in Tehran. Next, is *Ettela'at* (Information) one of the oldest newspapers in Iran, founded in 1926. *Iran*, launched in 1995, is a daily owned by the *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, the State news agency that also publishes an English edition, *Iran Daily*. The newspaper, like the agency, supports the policies of the government.

Shargh (East) is the main newspaper on the reformist side of the political spectrum. Founded in 2003, its publication has been suspended several times, but it has always returned to the newsstands. Another influential publication of the reformist camp is *Etemaad* (Trust), managed by the former MP Elias Hazrati who in 2005 founded the political group *Etemaad-e Melli* (National Trust) together with the former speaker of the parliament Mehdi Karroubi, one of the leaders of the Green Movement of 2009. Banned by the judiciary in that year, *Etemaad* has been publishing again since 2011. Both *Shargh* and *Etemaad* had reached a circulation of 100,000 copies by the mid-2000s. However, there are no figures on the present circulation. Other reformist newspapers are *Vaghaye Etefaghie* and *Arman-e Emrouz*. *Donya-ye Varzesh* (The World of Sports) is a sports newspaper.

Donya-ye Eghtesad (World of Economy) in Farsi and *Financial Tribune* in English are two newspapers specialised in economic news.

Radio

The State has the monopoly of radio and television broadcasting. But foreign- and Iranian-owned stations broadcasting from abroad are followed by a very large audience inside the country. Article 175 of the Constitution states that the appointment and dismissal of the head of the *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting* (IRIB) “rests with the Leader.” IRIB, known in Iran with the name *Seda va Sima* (Sound and Vision), has 13,000 employees and branches in 20 countries, and is among the largest media organisations in the Asian and Pacific region, offering both domestic and foreign radio and television services in several languages.

IRIB has 12 radio channels for domestic audiences (among them *Nationwide Radio*, *Cultural Radio*, *Youth Radio*, *Quran Radio* and *Sports Radio*) and 30 stations for foreign and international audiences.

Radio BBC in Farsi, founded in 1940, is the oldest foreign-based radio station broadcasting to Iran. It has always had a very important role in the dissemination of news not available on the State-controlled media. During the unrests that led to the fall of monarchic regime, between 1978 and 1979, it was through this channel that Iranians could hear the speeches of Ayatollah Khomeini from his exile in France. *Radio Farda*, based in Prague, is funded by the US government and is the most popular foreign-based radio service, with its mix of news and music. Other foreign stations offering services in Farsi for the Iranian audience are *Radio Zamaneh*, based in Amsterdam and partly funded by the Dutch government, *Radio France Internationale*, *Voice of Israel* and *Deutsche Welle* from Germany.

Television

Television is the leading medium through which people have access to the news, and the control of IRIB guarantees the Supreme Leader and his allies a powerful political tool that they can use also against other high level officials. During the campaign for the presidential elections of 2009, for example, Ayatollah Khamenei rejected the request of former President Rafsanjani, a leading figure in the Islamic Republic since its foundation, to have access to the television to answer the accusations of corruption raised against him and his family by President Ahmadinejad during a televised debate. One month after the elections the television did not broadcast a sermon of Rafsanjani during the main Friday prayer in Tehran, in which he criticised the crackdown of the protests and asked for a reconciliation in order to overcome what he was describing as a crisis. State television is also known for airing programs aimed at smearing and discrediting opposition activists and critical journalists and has a record of airing forced confessions by dissidents.

Despite a ban on using satellite equipment in force since 1994, foreign TVs are widely watched all over the country. Satellite dishes and the other necessary equipment can be bought on the flourishing illegal market. The police confiscate them in periodic operations and from time to time launch a major crackdown, especially in periods of political tensions. Normally - but not always - the owners of the dishes are made to pay a fine. The authorities also engage in jamming of foreign satellite signals. In recent years some officials and media reports have raised concerns over potential health consequences of the signals used for jamming. In any case, none of these measures can prevent millions of Iranians from watching the programs of the foreign-based stations. According to a 2010 survey by BBC Monitoring, about 40 percent of the population were watching satellite channels broadcasted from abroad.

The State Television operates 17 national channels (including *News*, *Sports*, *Science*, *Economy*, *Documentaries*, *Quran* and *Youth*), 30 provincial channels and 9 international channels, with programs in eight foreign languages. Among the

international channels there is *Al Alam* in Arabic, launched in 2003 with a style similar to that of the major pan-Arab satellite news TVs like *Al Jazeera* and *Al Arabiya*. *PressTV*, the all-news channel in English, is another international channel and has started its programs in 2007. *Sahar* is a multilingual channel that started its activity in 1990 and broadcasts programs in Kurdish, Urdu, Azeri, Bosnian and French. *Jam-e Jam* (the same name of the newspapers published by IRIB) broadcasts Farsi programs for Iranians living abroad, including TV series and films, sometimes with English subtitles. Other international channels are *iFilm*, whose production is based on Iranian films and TV programs, with Arabic and English subtitles or language options, *Al Kosar*, in Arabic, and *Hispan TV*, in Spanish.

Among the channels broadcasting in Farsi into Iran from abroad, the most watched are *BBC Persian*, funded by the UK government, *Voice of America-Persian News Network* (VOA PNN), funded by the United States and *Manoto TV*. There are no recent and precise figures on the number of viewers for either of these channels. According to a BBC Media Center article, *BBC Persian* had an audience of 11.4 million in 2014.

BBC Persian television was launched in January 2009 to target Persian speakers in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. It is a subdivision of *BBC World Service* and it broadcasts from London. During the nationwide protests in 2009, *BBC Persian* was regarded by many Iranians as the best and most precise source of information about the unfolding events. Therefore the authorities started jamming the channel, forcing it to switch to two other satellites in order to be able to continue the coverage. *BBC Persian* offers a wide range of programs of news, art, science, culture, technology and sport. The channel also introduces interviews with young, well known Iranian artists and musicians, who, due to the political and social situation in Iran, are forced to live abroad.

Voice of America - Persian News Network (VOA-PNN) started broadcasting from Washington DC on October 1996. In the first years after its launch, it enjoyed a high viewership, offering a variety of programs on political and social issues and organizing roundtables and debates with exiled Iranian activists and politicians. The station offers also programs on art, music and culture. But in recent years, especially after the launch of *BBC Persian TV* and *Manoto TV*, it is believed to have lost a large number of viewers.

Manoto TV has been broadcasting from London since 2010. It is owned by Marjan Television Network, established by Kayyan and Marjan Abbasi. The television is funded by venture capitalists, according to a 2011 report by the Foreign Policy Centre, a UK-based independent think-tank. But its officials decline to give details about their sponsors. *Manoto TV* targets a large population with a wide age range, as its programs vary from news to TV series and entertainment, like talent shows and reality shows. The station also produces documentaries focused in particular on pre-revolutionary Iran that seem to indicate a leaning for the former monarchic regime. The clearest sign of this tendency so far has been a 150-minutes-long interview with the former Queen Farah Diba, aired in December 2016.

Digital Media

According to Internet World Stats, Iran, with a population of 82 million, had 56.7 million Internet users in June 2016, with a penetration of 69 percent. The fast development of Internet (there were only 250,000 users in year 2000) has resulted in a huge increase in the number of blogs and the use of the new communication technology for the dissemination of news and debate on sensitive issues, partly as a response to the closure of several dozens reformist newspapers.

Hossein Derakhshan, at the time 26 years old, gained his reputation of 'Blogging grandfather', or 'Blogfather' of Iran by starting the first blog in Farsi in 2001, called *Sardabir: khodam* (Editor: Myself). In the same year he published online a manual on how to setup and manage a Persian-language blog. His example was soon followed by a large number of Iranians, to the point that in 2006 Farsi was listed by the publisher advertisement platform Technorati among the ten most

common languages among bloggers. Thousands, and soon tens of thousands of Iranians, among them many women, started online debates that could no longer find voice in the press due to the increasing pressure on reformist publications. These debates included not only political ones, but also sensitive social issues, such as relations between men and women, prohibited mix parties, sex and in general behaviors banned by the strict Islamic rules imposed by law in Iran.

As it had happened before with the first satellite TVs broadcasting into Iran, the authorities got alarmed for what they saw as a new attempt of the United States and other Western powers to disseminate moral corruption and encourage political rebellion, and by the mid-2000s they started to respond. With the arrests of several bloggers - including Derakhshan, that has spent six years in prison, from 2008 to 2014 - but also with new initiatives to strengthen the control of the Web and blocking tens of thousands of sites. These efforts have continued after the appearance of social media, that have played a central role in the street protests of 2009. In that year, according to the NGO Freedom House, a corporation linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, the Pasdaran) bought a major stake in the Telecommunications Company of Iran (TCI) in "an ostensible privatisation process", while the government retained the ownership of most of the remaining portion. A transaction that "effectively gave the IRGC indirect control over the country's dominant provider of fixed-line, mobile and Internet communication services." Direct access to the Internet through satellite is prohibited for private citizens. Based on the Computer Crime Law (CCL), ratified in 2009, service providers are responsible for any content shared online and have to close down the sites identified by a governmental committee for broadly defined violations, including the distribution of pornographic content. In January 2011 Iran has created a Cyber Police unit. In December of 2012 the chief of the unit for Tehran was dismissed over the death in detention of Sattar Beheshti, a 35-years-old blogger that had been arrested for criticizing the regime and that is believed to have been tortured to death. According to Freedom House, at least 50 bloggers were imprisoned in the years 2009 and 2010, and three - Saeed Malekpour, Vahid Asghari and Ahmad Reza Hashempour - were sentenced to death between October 2011 and January 2012, even though there is no news of their executions. The arrests, at a lower rate, have continued in more recent years.

Ali Jannati, who became minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance in 2013 in the new government of President Hassan Rouhani, has repeatedly stressed the need to loosen the strict policies on the use of Internet. Jannati, quoted by Jason Rezaian in an article for *The Washington Post* in 2014, described many of the policies that Iran has adopted since the 1979 Islamic revolution to control the flow of information, including Internet filtering, as "ridiculous." "We cannot restrict the advance of such technology under the pretext of protecting Islamic values," Jannati said. But one year later he resigned, and repressive actions to control and censor activities on the Internet have kept strengthening. Since 2011 Iranian authorities are also talking about a project to develop a 'national Internet' (also referred to as 'clean' or 'halal' Internet), separate from the World Wide Web and similar to systems already in use in North Korea and Cuba.

The response of the authorities, however, has not been limited to repressive initiatives. Since the 2000s, thousands of pro-government blogs have been opened, including the one of then President Ahmadinejad in 2006. The online presence of these sites, together with that of all Iranian newspapers and agencies, foreign media, bloggers and dissident groups - although often reachable only with the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and other illegal anti-filtering systems - offers the Iranian audience great opportunities of access to information and a space where a political debate remains possible in spite of the limitations that keep being imposed on the freedom of expression.

Social Networks

The latest figures on the use of social networks in Iran are offered by a survey conducted by the Iranian Students Polling Agency (ISPA), based in Tehran, in December 2015, whose results were published in January 2016 by the English-language Iranian newspaper *Financial Tribune*. According to this study, 53 percent of Iranians were using at least one type of social media network, with the most popular messaging application being Telegram. The results revealed that social media

networks were widely used among populations living in provincial capitals (56 percent) as well as in second-tier cities (56 percent) and villages (42 percent). In Tehran the figure went up to 60 percent. The difference between people with higher and lower education was wide, with 75 percent of Iranians with at least a university degree using at least one type of network, against 39 percent of the population with a high-school or lower degree.

The messaging service Telegram was rated as the most popular social media: Among people using at least one network, 71 percent were Telegram users, and 37.5 percent of the population aged at least 18 years said they were actively using it. It means that at least 20 million people older than 18 were members of Telegram. But since also people under 18 were actively using the messaging application, the overall number of users was well over 20 million. According to the survey, after Telegram, the Facebook-owned messaging service WhatsApp was the second most popular with 26 percent of the population aged 18 or older using the application, while the image-sharing platform Instagram came in third place with 16.6 percent.

Since ISPA and *Financial Tribune* operate in Iran, under the laws of the Islamic Republic, it is no surprise that they do not mention Facebook, one of the social media blocked in the country, but still used by many Iranians that access the site thanks to anti-filter proxy servers. According to Internet World Stats, in June 2016 the users of Facebook were 17.2 million, with a 20.8 percent penetration.

Facebook, together with YouTube, also banned in Iran, have been among the means most used by demonstrators in 2009 to organise the protests and report about clashes and security forces abuses, by sharing videos captured on mobile phones. The most famous of these videos is the one that shows Neda Agha Soltan shot to death in a street of Tehran during a demonstration.

In the latest move by the authorities to try to establish a full control over the Internet, the Supreme Council of Cyberspace, a body whose members are selected by the Supreme Leader, announced in May 2016 new regulations that would require foreign messaging application companies to move data they possess on Iranian users onto servers located inside the country. The UN rapporteur on human rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, has stressed "the concerns regarding the security and privacy of users" as a consequence of this decision. "The Council reportedly gave social media companies one year to comply with the new regulations," Shaheed added.

Opinion Makers

With the growing number of social media users, especially Telegram users, the number of bloggers and citizen journalists using the Telegram feature "Channel", which allows the owner to publish messages to all its followers, is growing. Two of the most famous of these citizen journalists are *Mamlekate* (roughly translated as: 'Is this the country?') and *Vahid Online*.

Mamlekate, the more politically oriented, has almost 300,000 readers, but it is still growing fast. *Vahid Online*, with over 100,000 viewers, picks out the news that, as he says, "are not usually covered by the official news outlets" but attract the public attention on the social media. Most of the times these are controversial news about sensitive matters, also in the social field, and people's reactions to them. For example, when in January 2017 the first Airbus bought by the national airline Iran Air after the end of the sanctions arrived in Tehran, he covered the different reactions on the social media. Or in October 2016 it provoked an avalanche of reactions with a joke made about a program of the State TV where the right of women to ask for divorce was discussed. He also covers news that are not necessarily about Iran but are interesting for Iranian audience, like Donald Trump's speeches. *Vahid Online* has won *Deutsche Welle's* People's Choice Award for Citizen Journalism.

Telegram has been used by young candidates to reach potential voters during the campaign for the parliamentary elections

of 2016. But also Twitter, though banned, is used to create debates about political or social issues that affect the daily life of common citizens. This is what happened with the creation of the hashtag #TechnoSanctions to discuss the consequences of the international sanctions.

Therefore, even though blogging remains an important form of expression for political protest, social media are gaining a central role, as arenas where it is possible to share and discuss opinions, to be kept informed about the latest developments at almost real time and where it is possible to involve also an international audience about certain subjects by posting messages in English. An example is the campaign in favor of the human rights activist Arash Sadeghi who was on a hunger strike in Evin prison in Tehran for 71 days to ask for the release of his wife, Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee, arrested after security agents had found an unpublished story in their apartment in which a character burns the Koran in protest. Mr. Sadeghi, who is serving a 19-year prison term on charges including "spreading propaganda against the system", "gathering and colluding against national security" and "insulting the founder of the Islamic Republic", ended his protest on the 3^d of January 2017 after his wife was granted temporary release from prison. During his hunger strike, an international Twitter campaign to support him was launched on Twitter under the hashtag #SaveArash. For some hours, the appeal for the release of his wife was the most shared tweet in the world on 31st of December 2016. The campaign also had the effect of provoking a rare unauthorised demonstration in front of Evin prison, with the participation of hundreds of people.

Sources

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- [Etemaad](#)
- [Ettela'at](#)
- [Financial Tribune](#)
- [Hamshahri](#)
- [Iran](#)
- [Iran Daily](#)
- [Jam-e Jam](#)
- [Jomhuri-ye Eslami](#)
- [Keyhan](#)
- [Keyhan International](#)
- [Resalat](#)
- [Shargh](#)
- [Tehran Times](#)
- [Vaghayeh Etefaghieh](#)

Radio

- [BBC](#)
- [IRIB State Radio](#)
- [Radio Farda](#)
- [Radio France Internationale](#)
- [Radio Zamaneh](#)

TV

- [Al Alam](#)
- [BBC Persian](#)
- [IRIB National Channels](#)
- [Jam-e Jam](#)
- [Manoto](#)
- [PressTv](#)
- [Sahar](#)
- [Voice of America-Persian News Network](#)

Digital Media

- [Eslahat news](#)
- [Iranwire](#)
- [Khabar online](#)
- [Meidaan](#)

Opinion makers

- Mamlekate (Telegram, @mamlekate)
- Vahid online (Telegram, @VahidOnline)

Organisations

Trade Unions

No independent or State-controlled journalists' trade unions exist in Iran. Until it was shut by the authorities, in 2009, the role of a trade union was played to a certain extent by the Association of Iranian Journalists. The organisation, whose main goal was to defend the freedom of expression, had among his aims also the protection of the legal and professional rights of media operators.

Journalist Associations

The Association of Iranian Journalists was founded in 1997 by a group of reformist journalists, when the election of the reformist President Mohammad Khatami opened a new era of partial liberalisation of the press. Among the founders was Isa Saharkhiz, at that time also head of the Press Department at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the centre of the politics of attempted liberalisations of those years. The Association is a member of the International Federation of Journalists and in 2008 it said it had 4,000 members.

After several episodes of harassment by the authorities during the presidency of the ultra conservative President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Association was shut on August of 2009 during the street protests against his re-election. Some weeks before Saharkhiz and the head of the Association, Ali Mazroui, had been arrested.

In June 2013, in his first news conference as president-elect, Hassan Rouhani pledged that he would do everything in his power for the Association to resume its activity. On March 2014 Ali Jannati, at that time minister of Culture and Islamic

Guidance, announced the lifting of the ban. This, however, did not happen. In August 2014 President Rouhani announced that his administration was preparing a bill for the creation of a new guild of journalists. But the banned Association reacted, expressing “worry” for an initiative that could lead to an attempt to institutionalise governmental domination over the press. To this day, the activity of the Association remains suspended.

Last January a member of the Parliament National Security Commission, Karimi Ghoddusi, said the Association of Journalists is illegal and ideologically close to the Green Movement that led the protests of 2009. For these reasons, he added, the ban on the organisation has to be kept.

News Agencies

The main and oldest news agency is the *Islamic Iranian News Agency* (IRNA), funded and controlled by the government through the ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. It was founded in 1934 as *Pars News Agency*, and changed its name after the revolution of 1979. It has 60 bureaus in Iran and 30 abroad and publishes two newspapers: *Iran*, in Farsi, and *Iran Daily*, in English. It has services in Farsi, English, Arabic, Turkish, French, Spanish, Russian and Urdu. It follows the line of the government.

Fars news agency, founded in 2003, is a semi-official agency considered close to the Revolutionary Guards, like *Tasnim*, founded in 2012. *Fars* has services in Farsi, English, Arabic and Turkish. *Tasnim* writes news and articles in Farsi and English. *Mehr* news agency, launched in 2003, available in Farsi, English, Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish and Urdu, is owned by the Islamic Propagation Organisation, like the English-language newspaper *Tehran Times*. The *Iranian Student News Agency* (ISNA), is run by university students. Established in 1999, it is considered to be more independent and moderate than IRNA. It offers its production in Farsi, English, French and Arabic. The *Islamic Labour News Agency* (ILNA) was founded in 2003 and belongs to the Workers' House, a labour union controlled by the government. It is considered close to the reform movement and can be read in Farsi, English and Arabic. *Tabnak* is a news agency belonging to Mohsen Rezai, a moderate conservative, former commander of the Revolutionary Guards, candidate to the presidential elections in 2005, 2009 and 2013 and now secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council, an institutional body that mediates on possible disagreements between the Parliament and the Guardian Council about laws to be approved. *Tabnak* writes in Farsi and Arabic.

Audience measurement organisations

There are no organisations in Iran that publish figures about audience measurement: an issue particularly sensitive from the political point of view, given that many platforms banned by the authorities, such as TV stations broadcasting from abroad and prohibited Internet sites and social media, can count in reality on a huge number of viewers and users. Some of this media organise their own private surveys, using illegal methods which results in uncertainty with regards to reliability. *BBC Persian*, for example, has relied on studies conducted by the Broadcasting Board of Governors, a network owned by the U.S. government, to estimate the numbers of its viewers in Iran in the past years. Normally, to assess the audience in the country, the banned TV stations also count the number of ‘likes’ on their social media pages. In order to try to collect more precise data, the Annenberg School for Communication, at the University of Pennsylvania, has launched a project called Iran Media Program, with the goal to strengthen a global network of Iranian media scholars and practitioners and providing a more nuanced understanding of the role of media and the flow of information in Iran, including through survey research on media consumption.

More accurate data could be provided in the future by market research firms such as Ipsos, who have announced an expansion of their media monitoring activities in Iran after acquiring the Tehran-based market research company IPC. Monitoring of Iranian TV advertising is expected to start from the second quarter of 2017. Elie Aoun, regional CEO of the

media measurement arm Ipsos Connect said: “Iran is going to be a big market, of course, it is growing exponentially, but the issue is that the market is still closed, so we don’t have a lot of clarity about this.”

Sources

News agencies

- [Fars](#)
- [ILNA](#)
- [IRNA](#)
- [ISNA](#)
- [Mehr](#)
- [Tabnak](#)
- [Tasnim](#)

Journalist associations

- [Association of Iranian Journalist](#) (banned)

Policies

Media legislation

Article 24 of the Iranian Constitution states that “publications and the press are free to discuss issues unless such is deemed harmful to the principles of Islam or the rights of the public.” But there is no clear definition of what is ‘harmful.’ This vagueness, together with the overlapping of jurisdiction of different authorities, contributes to an uncertainty in the application of the law that favors arbitrariness, censorship and repression.

It is interesting to note how the Press Law, ratified in 1986 and amended in 2000, defines not only the limitations of journalism as a profession, but also the duties of journalists in pursuing the “mission of the press.” Among these duties are “to campaign against manifestations of imperialistic culture (such as extravagance, dissipation, debauchery, love of luxury, spread of morally corrupt practices, etc) and to propagate and promote genuine Islamic culture and sound ethical principles.” Article 6 sets the ‘red lines’ of the activity of journalists, stating that the media are “permitted to publish news items except in cases when they violate Islamic principles and codes and public rights.” For example by “publishing atheistic articles”, “propagating obscene and religiously forbidden acts”, “propagating luxury and extravagance”, “creating discord between and among social walks of life”, “encouraging and instigating individuals and groups to act against the security, dignity and interest of the Islamic Republic of Iran” or “insulting Islam and its sanctities.” All violations not better specified that can lead to trials of journalists in front of public or revolutionary courts based on articles of the Penal Code that prescribes heavy sentences. Among the most common allegations raised against the defendants are “propaganda against the State” (article 500), that prescribes a sentence up to one year in prison, and “insulting the founder of Islamic Republic of Iran or the Supreme Leader” (article 514), that can be punished with imprisonment up to two years. Article 513 says that those guilty of “insults to the Islamic sanctities” are sentenced to death. Article 698 prescribes imprisonment up to two years or 74 lashes for those found guilty of “disturbing public opinion.” In the most recent flogging case recorded by Amnesty International, a journalist was

lashed 40 times in Najaf Abad, in the province of Isfahan, on January 5th 2017, “after a court found him guilty of inaccurately reporting the number of motorcycles confiscated by police in the city.” According to then United Nations rapporteur on human rights, Ahmed Shaheed, the blogger journalist Mohammad Reza Fathi, from the town of Saveh, in the North of the country, was sentenced to 444 lashes in June 2016 having been convicted of “publishing lies” and “disturbing public opinion” after three individuals who worked for local government bodies filed complaints against his critical writings. The execution of the sentence is pending a final ruling from the court of appeal.

The same limitations apply to online journalism. Blogs and websites are considered as publications and must register at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance following the same procedures as newspapers. Most of their owners, however, prefer not to do so, fearing the controls they should go through by security authorities. But the activity of news sites and blogs is regulated also by the Computer Crime Law (CCL) enforced in 2009. This law includes also punishments for spying, hacking, piracy, phishing, libel and publishing materials deemed to damage “public morality” or “dissemination of lies.” The CCL has made Internet Service Providers responsible for any content that appears on their sites and therefore they have to block the sites identified as carrying forbidden content by the Committee in Charge of Determining Unauthorised Websites, that is headed by the prosecutor general.

The authorities block tens of thousands of blogs and websites, a measure that doesn’t target only the reformist movement or dissident organisations, but also regularly registered sites linked to conservative or even government officials. In a report on the ‘Freedom on the Net’ in Iran, the NGO Freedom House says that in May 2011 the website of Haft-e Sobh, a group close to President Ahmadinejad, was blocked and the website of the Friday Prayer leader of the city of Kashan was taken offline after he revealed details about a conflict between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad. In December of that year also the website of former President Rafsanjani, head of Expediency Discernment Council and one of the most influential clerics in the country, was blocked and temporarily shut down.

Accountability systems

The Press Law states that to issue a publication or to open a news site or a blog, a licence from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance is necessary. Using foreign aid directly or indirectly is forbidden and considered a crime. The Press Supervisory Board is the body that investigates the competency of applicants, requesting information of “competent authority”, that is the Ministry of Intelligence, of Justice and the police. The board is also responsible for examining press violations, shutting down the publications if deemed necessary and filing requests for legal proceedings to competent courts. According to article 10 of the law, it “shall consist of devoted Muslims”, including a judge of the Supreme Court, the minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, a member of parliament, a university professor, a managing director of a newspaper, a teacher of Qom religious seminary and a member of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution.

Article 34 of the Press Law states that crimes attributed to the press can be examined by a general court or a revolutionary court, in accordance with the laws pertaining to inherent competency

In March 2012 the Supreme Leader issued a decree establishing the Supreme Council on Cyberspace (SCC), under his direct control. The SCC, according to Freedom House, “is intended to provide a centralised focal point for policy making and regulation of Iran’s virtual space, effectively removing such authority from the executive, legislative and judiciary branches of government.”

Regulatory authorities

There are big differences between what the laws prescribe in theory and the way they are enforced in practice, and almost

always to the detriment of the freedom of expression.

According to Article 34 of the Press Law, trials for press violations must take place in front of an open court and in the presence of a jury. But reality is very different. The jury is normally absent and most of the cases referred to a revolutionary court see the defendant arrested and kept in solitary confinement for long months without a formal incrimination and legal assistance, before being tried behind closed doors and with very limited assistance by a lawyer.

Repressive initiatives against journalists are often initiated also outside the normal legal procedures involving the Press Supervisory Board. In recent years, especially after the agreement between Iran and the countries of the group '5 plus 1' on the nuclear program in 2015, hardliners in the judiciary and the Intelligence unit of the Revolutionary Guards have conducted a campaign against what they consider a supposed infiltration of Western influence in the country, arresting a number of journalists. Among them was Isa Saharkhiz, the reformist former head of the Press Department in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance under President Khatami. Arrested in November 2015 with other three reformist journalists, Saharkhiz has been sentenced in August 2016 by the revolutionary court of Tehran to three years in jail for 'insulting the Supreme Leader' and 'propaganda against the State.' Saharkhiz had contributed to the opposition news website *Rouz Online*, but the authorities have not clarified publicly what activity led to his arrest and to the verdict. Saharkhiz had already been imprisoned from 2009 to 2013 for the same accusations.

The Supreme National Security Council issues directions to the newspapers about the line they have to follow. According to Freedom House, in 2015 the Council issued guidelines to newspapers ordering them to refrain from criticizing the accord on the nuclear program. "Authorities took action against several conservative publications that had criticised the nuclear deal, including the weekly *9 Dey*, which was suspended". In 2014, it was the judiciary that issued a warning to the press to refrain from reporting on a series of acid attacks against young women in the city of Isfahan. Many Iranians are convinced that such aggressions were made by conservative Islamist vigilantes that wanted to punish not properly veiled women. Four journalists and a photographer of *ISNA* news agency were arrested for covering street protests against these episodes.

The confusion that reigns in the enforcement of the laws is demonstrated also by the regulations concerning Facebook and Twitter, that are banned but at the same time are used by many officials - including the Supreme Leader, the president and the foreign minister - to post messages directed to Iranians. This is another example of the uncertainty that characterises the accountability system and that helps the enforcement of censorship and an acceptance of self-censorship by many journalists in the print press and in Internet.

Sources

Laws, regulations and institutions

- [Computer Crime Law](#)
- [Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran](#)
- [Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance](#)
- [Penal Code](#)
- [Press Law](#)
- [Supreme National Security Council](#)

Education

Universities and schools

In his book *Journalism in Iran: From Mission to Profession*, Hossein Shahidi reminds us that the first training course for journalists was organised in Tehran in 1939 by the Ministry of Culture and had among its teachers some of the leading literary figures of the time. In 1965 the publisher of the newspaper *Keyhan*, Mostafa Mesbahzadeh, set up a College for Social Communication Sciences, with four years BA courses in journalism, photography, public relations, translation and filmmaking. In 1969 the Higher School of Cinema and Television was founded, with the ownership of the State television and radio corporation. After the 1979 revolution the new authorities shut down all universities in order to enforce a policy for the elimination of secular and leftist elements among teachers and students. It was only in the 1980s that education in journalism reemerged, for the first time with courses organised by the Department of Social Communication Sciences at the Allameh Tabatabai University, controlled by the State. Today there are six universities teaching journalism: Allameh Tabatabai University, Tehran University (also owned by the State), Sooreh Institute of Higher Education (private), Kerman Institute of Higher Education (private), the public Payame Nour University, that offers courses in journalism in 24 branches around the country, and the Iran Broadcasting University, affiliated to the *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting* (IRIB) that has branches in Tehran, Qom and Dubai and is specialised in TV and radio journalism and directing. Acceptance to all universities, including for the courses in journalism, requires taking the national university entrance exam, the so called *Concours*.

Professional development

An obvious disconnection exists in Iran between journalism education and the job of journalist. On the one hand, most of newspapers and other news platform don't require a journalism degree for their employees, and many journalists start their career without an academic degree in this subject. On the other hand, many of the graduates in journalism choose not to enter this career. Even though there are no reliable figures on this matter, according to a report from the website *Khabarnegaran-e Iran* (Iran Journalists) of 2014, only 10 percent of journalism graduates worked in the Iranian press.

One reason is that, given the difficulty of the *Concours*, the general entrance exam for all Iranian universities, many students decide to take the test on different subjects, and then they choose the one they passed. Many of them, therefore, end up in a faculty that was not their first choice, and they have little desire for undertaking the respective profession. This is very often the case for journalism, considered by many as one of the most uncertain and dangerous jobs in a country with a very high level of censorship and repression. Those that choose this job must be ready to face all the connected risks, and the political characterisation of most of the publications, printed or online, contributes to make of a journalist an activist before a professional.

Several sources, however, stress also the unsatisfactory quality of the curricula of the schools of journalism in Iran, that don't give the students the right professional tools to work in such a complicated scenario. According to Hossein Shahidi, "the quality of journalism taught at colleges is in need of improvement, having fallen due to the scarcity of resources, shortage of practical experience and over-emphasis on abstract, theoretical subjects."

Sources

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- [Iran Broadcasting University](#)

- [Kerman Institute of Higher Education](#)
- [Payame Nour University](#)
- [Sooreh Institute of Higher Education](#)
- [Tehran University](#)

Conclusions

Conclusion

The press environment remains affected by severe censorship and repression. This, however, cannot prevent the access of a large mass of Iranians to plural sources of information, many of them illegal. The ban on foreign-based satellite TVs is largely circumvented by residents of big cities and rural areas alike. A crucial aspect in the media landscape is that it is still largely dominated by televised information. On the Internet what is going on at the moment looks like a cat-and-mouse game between authorities who consistently try to enforce new restrictions and controls and technology-savvy young generations who are consistently looking for new ways to keep themselves informed and generate debates on political and social sensitive issues that are frowned upon by the representatives of the Islamic system as well as by the most traditional sectors of society. A game that seems bound to continue, because none of the two sides seem able to reach a final victory. What is clear, however, given the high level of education and the young age of the population (56 percent under the age of 25), is that preventing Iranians from accessing sources of information, be it domestic or foreign, is impossible.

Legal domestic media are highly politicised, with a predominant role of the conservatives, first of all thanks to the control on TV broadcasting. But the presence of the other factions, including the reformists, has survived over 15 years of repression following the liberalisation policy of the first years of the Khatami presidency. Reformist newspapers and websites can continue their activity like those of all the other groups that accept the 'red lines' of the system in power, even though they had to soften their tones and accept some forms of self-censorship.

Even the presidency of Hassan Rouhani, after the eight years of the ultra conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, could not substantially improve the situation of the freedom of the press in spite of the promises made during his electoral campaigns. This is perhaps due to the limited powers of the president compared with those of other institutions - most importantly the judiciary and the security services - that are controlled by conservatives. This is proved by the fact that the main wave of repression against the press started during the presidency of the reformist Khatami, in 2000, although against his will.

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Document generated on 10/12/2018