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Finding a Voice: Using the Internet for Free Speech and Expression in Iran

Abstract

In July 2009, many Iranians took to the streets to protest the results of the presidential election in which Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won with a reported 62% of the vote. The protests, stemming from allegations of electoral fraud, quickly exposed the government's limited tolerance for dissent. In addition to street demonstrations, protestors utilized social networking websites to express their opposition to the election results. The world, following Internet feeds, witnessed the restrictive mechanisms Iran's government placed on expression and speech. People throughout the world admonished Iran for the government's interference with cell phone and Internet networks. Iran's free speech and expression restrictions are frequently criticized as some of the most repressive in the world. In the days and months following the election, people in Iran and around the world came to understand how the Internet has become a prominent method of protest, as well as a new area in which individual's freedoms can be repressed.

Keywords

Human rights, Iran, Free speech, Free expression, Internet, Protest, Elections, Political rights, Civil rights

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Finding a Voice: Using the Internet for Free Speech and Expression in Iran

By Chelsea Zimmerman

In July 2009, many Iranians took to the streets to protest the results of the presidential election in which Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won with a reported 62% of the vote. The protests, stemming from allegations of electoral fraud, quickly exposed the government's limited tolerance for dissent. In addition to street demonstrations, protestors utilized social networking websites to express their opposition to the election results. The world, following Internet feeds, witnessed the restrictive mechanisms Iran's government placed on expression and speech. People throughout the world admonished Iran for the government's interference with cell phone and Internet networks. Iran's free speech and expression restrictions are frequently criticized as some of the most repressive in the world. In the days and months following the election, people in Iran and around the world came to understand how the Internet has become a prominent method of protest, as well as a new area in which individual's freedoms can be repressed.

In the pre-election period, Iran witnessed an increasing number of citizen groups pushing for a regime that would promote greater freedom. The election campaigns served as a platform for individuals and groups to promote the reform of civil society in Iran. When the election results were released, however, citizens desiring greater influence in the government had reason to be disappointed. The premature declaration of victory for incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad incited individuals to openly protest the results of the election on claims of fraud and because of concern for the potential implications of Ahmadinejad's victory on the movement for social reform. The opposition movement exercised the inherent right of its members to freely speak out against the regime and express their ideas for greater social change in Iran, turning to the Internet as one of their methods.

Previous censorship in Iran focused on the independent press and journalists publishing views contrary to the Islamic ideology of the ruling regime. Article 24 of the Iranian Constitution grants citizens freedom of speech and expression through publications and press, provided the expression is not detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam. The Islamic clause, included in many articles of the constitution, has become one of the regime's tools to repress citizens opposing the state-sanctioned belief system. As the constraints on journalists increased/grew in Iran, alternative methods of communication and information sharing proliferated. A campaign to eradicate independent newspapers in 2000 led many journalists to retreat from the arena of print media and instead produce their work on websites.

As governmental repression of public expression increased, individual citizens also turned to alternate avenues to promote their ideas. The most prominent public method for expression became the Internet, which provided a bevy of opportunities for Iranian citizens to voice frustrations with the regime's censorship and reject public restrictions on ideas and speech. Citizens detailed their thoughts on blogs and online diaries, interacted on social networking sites, sent messages to multiple users, and joined online discussion groups to vent frustrations and share ideas. The rapid increase in Persian blogs earned Iran the nickname "Weblogistan," which connotes the powerful role of blogging in Iranian society that persists today.

The use of social networking websites played a crucial role in the organization of the movement and dissemination of information. Mass Twitter messages were sent communicating locations for protests and developments on the post-election situation in Iran. Facebook provided the international news media with information not easily obtained due to the repression of journalism in Iran. External actors, i.e. other Facebook and Twitter members, used social websites to spread information on the election aftermath throughout the world. People used the blogosphere to speak out about what they witnessed, thought, and felt during the post-election events.

Though the Internet promotes freedom of expression and speech through its multiplicity of uses, it can also be used to restrict ideas, thoughts and news. The Iranian government began to heavily regulate Internet usage during the post-election protests. The government was able to block certain websites and track dissidents using technology to penetrate the opposition movement. Facebook posts and Twitter messages actually assisted the regime's intelligence-gathering operation by revealing connections between dissidents. Social website tools now had the potential to backfire on individuals and groups that used them to express ideas opposing the current Iranian regime. The regime was not originally prepared for the strong influence of social networking in promoting dissent, but it acted quickly to reduce the expression of its opponents in Iran.

The Iranian regime's repression of free speech has had effects on Iranian citizens outside the Internet and in the real world. Governmental restraints placed on an individual's ability to freely express ideas and beliefs have led to the incarceration of citizens, activists, and journalists. Citizen groups, journalists, and human rights organizations both within and outside Iran have demanded the government reduce its mechanisms of repression. Despite the increased pressure for change, the restrictions on expression have escalated.

Many in Iran desire free speech and expression. Student unions protest the restrictions on expression and thought that dominate the academic arena. Organizations such as Reporters Without Borders and Committee to Protect Journalists campaign to rescind the government imposed restrictions on the press. Human rights organizations, both internally and internationally, promote governmental tolerance for all citizens to freely express their beliefs and ideas. However, without increasing governmental respect for speech and expression, individuals will continue to face harsh repression because of their commitment to exercise this inherent human right.

Annotations

Abootalebi, Ali R. 2009. "Iran's Tenth Presidential Election: Candidates, Issues, and Implications." *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 13 (3): 1-18.

Annotation: A frequent lecturer on Iranian and Middle Eastern Affairs and Professor at the University of Wisconsin, the author effectively utilizes his academic knowledge to analyze the situation in Iran. Abootalebi is not concerned with the alleged fraud that occurred, but instead focuses on the implications of the election given the 2009 post-election events. The author argues that the clash between ideologies is not over the existence of the Islamic system of government, but rather on the degree of Islamization in Iran. While the author does not address

the Internet-based methods for mobilization in the election aftermath or the human right violations, this article provides an alternate understanding of the deeper social forces that fueled the post-election protests and the desire of citizens for free expression.

Addis, Casey L. 2009. "Iran's 2009 Presidential Election." Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 15.

Annotation: The author, a Middle Eastern Affairs analyst for the Congressional Research Service, provides a brief overview of the 2009 Iranian presidential election and its aftermath. The report outlines the details of the candidates, election results, allegations of fraud, and the outcome. The author's purpose is to suggest implications of the Iranian social movement for US policy, particularly Iran's nuclear program, support of terrorist organizations, and position toward Israel. The author does not draw attention to the use of social networking and Internet by the opposition, but instead focuses on the restriction of Internet use and other social media tools by the government.

Afshari, Ali and H. Graham Underwood. 2009. "The Green Wave." *Journal of Democracy* 20 (4): 6-10.

Annotation: Iranian political activist, Ali Afshari, in conjunction with freelance researcher and writer, H. Graham Underwood, produced an article that describes and analyzes the Green Wave from the 2009 post-election opposition movement. The analysis centers on the initial reasons for the rise of opposition forces against the incumbent, Ahmadinejad, and the decentralization of the actual movement. Various features of the movement are discussed, including the role of diverse levels of Iranian society, the range of political activism amongst opposition forces, and the role of civil society organizations. Afshari and Underwood incorporate the role of the Internet in the movement by examining it as a loose civil society organization using Facebook, Twitter, and even email listservs. This piece reflects a concise analysis of the opposition movement, its position in Iranian society, and its potential challenges and successes.

Afshari, Reza. 2009. "A Historic Moment in Iran." *Human Rights Quarterly* 31: 839-55.

Annotation: Afshari, a professor of history and human rights at Pace University, wrote this article in July 2009 at the conclusion of the protests against Iran's presidential election. The author's work utilizes imagery of Neda Agha-Soltan, a young protestor whose execution by militia forces during the opposition movement was recorded and sent around the world, to evoke a sense of repression in the reader. Afshari focuses on the role of the class-culture divide, which he recognizes as an important factor in the opposition movement. Afshari's specialty in human rights provides a perspective not highlighted in other sources on the post-election crisis in Iran.

———. 2001. Human Rights in Iran: The Abuse of Cultural Relativism. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Annotation: Afshari addresses the situation of human rights in Iran with specific chapters focusing on restrictions to freedom of expression and speech. Afshari is critical of the religious rhetoric of the Iranian regime, claiming that Islamic doctrine does not protect the state from internal and external criticism of its human rights violations.

Alavi, Nasrin. 2005. We Are Iran. Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press.

Annotation: Alavi recognizes the importance of blogs in Iran and the utilization of blogs by Iranian citizens as a creative outlet to express different political and social perspectives that are frequently repressed by the regime. The book incorporates quantitative data on the prevalence of social media tools in Iran with local perspectives on repression, using excerpts from Iranian weblogs that Alavi translated from Persian. Alavi divides the excerpts into categories that represent legal conflicts, repression of women, restrictions on free expression, and the implications of the repressive regime on the faith and religion of Iranians. Alavi's compilation was written prior to the presidential elections of 2009; nevertheless, it offers insight on the increasing importance of social media in Iranian society and the post-election opposition movement.

Bahar, Sarvenaz. 1993. "Guardians of Thought: Limits on Freedom of Expression in Iran," in Cynthia Brown (ed.), *A Middle East Watch Report*, 140. New York: Human Rights Watch.

Annotation: Of particular interest in this report are chapters on the legal framework in Iran that promotes governmental repression of freedom of expression and banned political expression. These sections highlight the mechanisms utilized by the government to control speech and expression throughout the country, particularly related to political dissent. The report also includes specific examples, testimonies, and interviews with Iranians who experienced restrictions on free speech first hand. Although this report represents Iranian repression of free expression from 1993, it provides important historical context to the continuation of restrictions imposed by successive Iranian regimes.

Boroumand, Ladan. 2009. "Civil Society's Choice." *Journal of Democracy* 20 (4): 16-20.

Annotation: As research director and co-founder of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation promoting human rights in Iran, Boroumand is familiar with the human rights violations that have occurred under successive Iranian regimes. This article focuses on the role of civil society—women's rights groups, human rights groups, and student organizations—in the campaigning and electoral process during the 2009 presidential election in Iran. The author concludes by recognizing both the repercussions of the opposition movement in the aftermath

of the election and the positive stance taken by members of civil society against the repressive policies of previous regimes.

Bucar, Elizabeth M., and Roja Fazaeli. 2008. "Free Speech in Weblogistan? The Offline Consequences of Online Communication." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40 (3): 403-19.

Annotation: The authors provide examples of attempts to exercise freedom of expression under a regime that represses free speech by depicting the current role of the Internet and social media tools in Iran. The paper begins by contrasting the advent of blogging in Iran with the regulation of print media by the religious regime. The authors then provide political and social contexts for the repression of bloggers within Iran, followed by specific cases of the repression of three separate bloggers. The authors conclude by mentioning the challenges that Iran's blogging sphere faces from repressive techniques of the regime. While blogs can be used to promote freedom of expression in a repressive regime, the authors also offer examples of the regime's use of social media to find and arrest dissidents.

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. 2010. "2009 Human Rights Report: Iran." Washington DC: US State Department.

Annotation: This annual report issued by the US State Department provides background information on the government of Iran and human rights violations documented from the past year. Since the United States does not have an embassy in Iran, the report is published utilizing non-US governmental sources. The report is divided into different categories, including freedom of speech and expression, and each category is analyzed with regard to government tactics that violate universal human rights. It provides an overview of the accumulation of human rights violations over the previous year and mentions efforts of specific human rights instruments and organizations to improve the human rights situation in Iran.

Burns, Alex and Ben Eltham. 2009. "Twitter Free Iran: An Evaluation of Twitter's Role in Public Diplomacy and Information Operations in Iran's 2009 Election Crisis." In *Communications Policy & Research Forum 2009*, 298-310. University of Technology, Sydney.

Annotation: Australian academics Alex Burns and Ben Eltham utilize a comparative framework to analyze the implications of social media on movements for regime change. Presenting research on the role of Twitter in Iran's contentious 2009 presidential election, the authors question its effectiveness as a tool for social mobilization and the consequences of its use. The article includes an analysis of the role of Twitter users in globalizing awareness of the social movement and a compilation of protest events, categorized to correspond to an existing standard of resource mobilization popularized by historical sociologist, Charles Tilly. The authors address advocates of Twitter's success in the social movement in 2009 and note the

subsequent role of Twitter in providing local militia forces with the information to pursue individuals.

Carey, Henry F. 2009. "The June 2009 Election in Comparative Perspective." *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis* 26 (2): 68-82.

Annotation: Carey, Assistant Professor in the Department of Politics at Georgia State University, analyzes and critiques the methods used by the incumbent regime and the opposition forces during the 2009 presidential election in Iran. His purpose is to identify the potential for democratization through the attempts of the opposition party to contest the victory of the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Carey uses case analyses of similar movements in other regions and political cultures to understand the actions and future of the current regime in Iran. His conclusion is not optimistic about the potential for democratization in Iran; however, he does not apply a successful procedural definition of democracy, which may hinder any predictions about future repression or transition by the regime.

Dayem, Mohamed Abdel. 2009. "Attempting to Silence Iran's 'Weblogistan.'" *Nieman Reports* 63 (2): 42-44.

Annotation: Mohamed Abdel Dayem, program coordinator for the Middle East & North Africa Program at the Committee to Protect Journalists, is familiar with the repression of free expression in Iran. He attempts to provide a balanced perspective on the positive developments of social media in Iran and its negative consequences. Acknowledging the increasing capability of the Iranian government to restrict free expression on the Internet, Dayem highlights two cases of bloggers who were persecuted by the government for political and religious comments that appeared in their blogs. Dayem uses these cases to demonstrate the different tactics of bloggers and the types of comments that can incite the regime to enhance its repression and incarceration of dissenters. Dayem's conclusion is that the increasing number of Iranians who blog, even with greater government attempts to regulate and restrict social media tools, continues to test the limits of free expression.

———. 2009. "Middle East Bloggers: The Streets Lead Online." In *Committee to Protect Journalists Special Reports*. Available online: <http://www.cpj.org/reports/2009/10/middle-east-bloggers-the-street-leads-online.php>

Annotation: With a focus on the escalating presence of bloggers in the Middle East, the author draws attention to several cases of governmental repression on the Internet throughout the region. Dayem provides statistics of the increasing prevalence of blogs and their ability to provide citizens with an outlet for dissent and a forum to promote respect for human rights. Dayem concludes with recommendations to guarantee the rights of journalists and citizens to freely express their ideas and beliefs on the Internet. The author recommends specific actions to

be taken by regional governments, technology firms, the United States government, and the European Union in order to improve this situation.

Ebadi, Shirin. 2008. "View from Iran." *Index on Censorship* 37 (3): 26-30.

Annotation: Shirin Ebadi, a respected lawyer and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, was interviewed to provide insight on the state of free expression in Iran. Ebadi has represented several journalists and dissidents in court for violations of state controls on freedom of expression. Ebadi analyzes the increased repression she has witnessed over the past few years as being motivated by fear on the part of the government. The interview concludes with both a celebratory note for the sixty year anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and an appeal for multilateral efforts to address violations of free expression. The interview provides the perspective of a notable Iranian figure and human rights activist on the current repression of free expression.

Fischlin, Daniel, and Martha Nandorfy. 2007. *The Concise Guide to Global Human Rights*. Montreal: Black Rose Books.

Annotation: The chapter of particular importance in this book addresses rights of communication, specifically in the media. Fischlin and Nandorfy point out both the benefits and drawbacks of excessive media outlets in the context of global human rights. As a profit-driven force, the authors argue, media has the potential to provide biased access to information on human rights violations occurring internationally. On the other hand, the authors note the ability of the media to empower people and mobilize populations for collective action. The publication was released before the 2009 presidential election in Iran, but its overview of communication rights in the context of global human rights provides an opportunity to analyze the role of communication rights exercised by both the opposition and incumbent forces in Iran.

Gheytauchi, Elham, and Babak Rahimi. 2009. "The Politics of Facebook." In *Open Democracy*. Available online: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/email/the-politics-of-facebook-in-iran> (accessed May 7, 2010).

Annotation: This piece concentrates on the role of the government in Internet censorship in Iran,—the reasons for pursuing certain actions, and the implications for Iranian citizens and society. The key features highlighted by Rahimi and Gheytauchi are the mechanisms employed for censorship and restriction of the Internet and the political logic behind these repressive tactics. Central to this analysis is the lifting of government restrictions on Facebook, the most popular social networking site in Iran. The authors address the role of the government in limiting free expression in Iran through Internet filtering, but conclude that the ban on Facebook was lifted to decrease protest.

Human Rights Watch. 2010. "The Islamic Republic at 31: Post-Election Abuses Show Serious Human Rights Crisis." 22. New York: Human Rights Watch.

Annotation: This prescriptive report written by Human Rights Watch is compiled from a small sample of telephone interviews with different actors in Iran after the contested 2009 presidential election. The report informs the audience of some of the human rights violations that were perpetrated by the regime against dissenters and provides recommendations for the government of Iran to address these violations. Specifically, Human Rights Watch encourages the government to investigate and hold accountable the perpetrators of the repression. As a mechanism to promote increased accountability for human rights violations in Iran, the report is easy to understand, informative, and accessible to individuals interested in the human rights situation within post-election Iran.

International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran. 2009. "Accelerating Slide into Dictatorship: Human Rights in Iran since 12 June 2009." Available online: <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2009/09/report09/>.

Annotation: This organization, dedicated to promoting respect for human rights in Iran, published this report in September 2009, chronicling violations that occurred in the aftermath of the presidential election. The report focuses on the arrest and treatment of detainees and journalists and concludes with testimony from an Iranian dissident, Ebrahim Sharifi, a campaign worker for one of the reform candidates who was arrested for his participation in protests following the election. The report focuses on documenting the violations to ensure access to information on this abuse of human rights to the global community.

Iran Proxy. 2007. "Future Web Censorship Bypass." *Index on Censorship* 36 (4): 70.

Annotation: This one-page statement by the anti-filtering group, Iran Proxy, provides an optimistic assertion of the necessity of blogs and social media within Iran. While acknowledging the efforts of the regime to repress and restrict the freedom of speech occurring on the Internet, Iran Proxy states unequivocally that the repressive tendencies of the government will not succeed. Iran Proxy expresses concern over the increase of repressive mechanisms and control by the government on the Internet. Yet it also highlights the positive features of Internet usage within Iran as a mechanism for uniting activists in opposition to the controlling methods employed by the Iranian regime.

Lerman, Kristina, and Rumi Ghosh. 2010. "Information Contagion: An Empirical Study of the Spread of News on Digg and Twitter Social Networks." Paper presented at the 4th International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media 2010. Washington DC.

Annotation: This paper utilizes the quantitative research of Lerman and Ghosh to determine the speed and strength of two social networking tools, Twitter and Digg, in circulating news. The empirical research is focused on general use of social networking to disseminate information, and the authors specifically mention the ability of Twitter to mobilize, organize, and inform during the post-election crisis in Iran. The authors then compare the use of Twitter and Digg to spread three similar news stories throughout the global community. The authors advocate greater understanding of the effects of social networking.

Morozov, Evgeny. 2009. "Iran: Downside to the "Twitter Revolution."" *Dissent* 56 (4): 10-14.

Annotation: This author is critical of Twitter's role in Iran's post-election crisis of 2009. Morozov, a blogger for Foreign Policy, is familiar with the implications of immediate news coverage from social media. The author advocates awareness of the "dark side" of social networking under politically repressive governments and admonishes the media for its lack of attention to the Iranian government's use of social media tools to identify and punish dissenters. Morozov encourages the United States to rethink the positive and negative implications of social media tools and advanced technology for US foreign policy, particularly regarding Iran. While Morozov recognizes the potentially positive impact of Twitter and blogging in Iran, this piece focuses on the negative outcomes. By comparing the "Twitter Revolution" to the game of "Telephone," he diminishes positive implications of the Internet for the post-election protests and instead frames social media tools as potentially distorting the actual climate of political mobilization.

Rahimi, Babak. 2008. "The Politics of the Internet in Iran," in Mehdi Semati (ed.), Media, Culture and Society in Iran: Living with Globalization and the Islamic State. London: Routledge. 37-56.

Annotation: Rahimi's section in this book covers the history of the Internet in Iran—from its advent to the placement of restrictive governmental measures and the arrival of the large blogging community. The author analyzes the increasing role of the Internet as the primary public forum for dissent. Of equal importance is the future of the Internet in Iran, which Rahimi speculates as including increases in both government opposition and restrictive mechanisms and censorship. The author concludes by emphasizing the potential role of the Internet in Iran to pursue democratic governance. The piece is well-researched, concise, and includes endnotes to expand on and explain certain features not covered in the scope of the chapter.

Seyed-Emami, Kavous. 2008. "Youth, Politics, and Media Habits in Iran," in Mehdi Semati (ed.), Media, Culture and Society in Iran. Cambridge: Routledge. 57-68.

Annotation: This quantitative piece analyzes the use of media by youth (students at universities in Tehran) to obtain political information. Conducted in 2005, this study demonstrates less reliance on Internet sources and more reliance on television. The Internet was defined as a form of alternative media on the survey. The researcher concludes that the Internet will become a

more popular source for political information, particularly for Iranian youth. This piece provides statistical analysis of the utilization of media for political purposes.

Simon, Joel. 2010. "Repression Goes Digital." *Columbia Journalism Review* 48 (6): 12-14.

Annotation: As executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, Joel Simon focuses on the increasing challenges to journalistic freedom through the advent of social media. His concern over increased government repression due to the proliferation of social media tools used by dissidents suggests a need for both professional and amateur journalists to adapt their methods beyond the control of repressive regimes. Simon highlights the need for increased pressure by a coalition of journalists, human rights groups, and technology and media organizations on regimes that attempt to restrict social media. While acknowledging that dissidents appear to benefit from social media more than repressive governments, he expresses concern for the potential of regimes to utilize social media tools against the opposition.

Zarwan, Elijah. 2005. "False Freedom: Online Censorship in the Middle East and North Africa." 148. New York: Human Rights Watch.

Annotation: This report focuses on the advent of the Internet in the Middle East and its subsequent application by repressed citizens to freely express their ideas and beliefs. The report chronicles the rise of the Internet, the opportunity for freedom of speech and expression it provides citizens, and the ensuing repression techniques adopted by regimes in the region. This report includes specific case studies of Internet censorship and control in particularly repressive regimes. It concludes with a letter, disseminated by Human Rights Watch to Middle Eastern regimes with aggressive Internet policies, requesting information on each country's laws regarding Internet access and censorship.