Censor this: Iran's web of lies

Hossein Derakhshan

22 January 2004

Iran's censors have a new enemy: the internet. But users of new media in the country are inventing ways to speak truth to power.

Iranians have never watched their government officials as closely as they did during December's UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva.

Thanks to the internet, this was the first time that many Iranians inside and outside their country were able to monitor the activities of Iranian government delegates in full – at a UN summit or any other type of meeting. Not only were all the Iranian government's proposals for the summit's declaration of principles posted online, but all their schedules, plans, speeches, sessions, and press conferences were also open to the public through the summit's official website.

It was one of the greatest moments of my life to see the toughest questions on censorship posed to the Iranian president, Seyyid Mohammad Khatami, by foreign journalists at a press conference. I watched it live online.

Khatami denied that his government censors political and news websites, and insisted (contrary to the testimonies of hundreds of Iranians and the world press) that only 240 websites are blacklisted in Iran for being radically 'anti-Islamic'.

In relation to an authoritarian regime like Iran, I am more optimistic than Solana Larsen and James Cowling on the globally positive impact of the summit. This impact can be measured not so much through the official agenda of the summit as in light of the way it empowered internet users to monitor and challenge their top officials.

Summit blog spurred action

The controversy surrounding the press conference began on a bilingual blog called the Daily Summit. British and Arab journalists covered the WSIS on this independent website through brief and informative comments and links.

A single post on the Daily Summit asked Iranians to confirm or deny the news that Iran had filtered and blocked access to the Google search engine. Hundreds of frustrated Iranians responded within 24 hours

confirming not only the blockage of Google, but also reporting that many other news websites and political blogs were blocked by the government.

However, there were quite a few among the hundreds who totally rejected the reality of internet censorship in Iran. This only made western readers more confused. Is the internet censored in Iran or not?

Users tangled in web of secrecy

Confusion is what the Iranian government really wants. As a result of power struggles in Iran, there are many different bodies claiming control of the internet.

Legally, it is the government and particularly the ministry of telecommunications who are responsible for any sort of policy-making and control. But other institutions like the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), the ministry of intelligence, and the supreme council of cultural revolution, try to have their say in the decision-making process. This could eventually bring them considerable political power and lots of money.

The serious censorship started about six months ago, a few days before the anniversary of the 1999 student protests in Tehran.

Meanwhile, the government has allowed several 'trusted' companies to start up big internet connection providers (ICPs) that provide internet connections to individual consumers and smaller ICPs. Government blacklists and updates are sent directly to all ICPs as classified documents, and are never officially published.

The serious censorship started about six months ago, a few days before the anniversary of the 1999 student protests in Tehran. The government asked the ICPs to block the IP numbers – the numerical address that lies beneath the outward web address – of "inappropriate" websites.

Because more than one site can exist at one IP address through shared hosting accounts, many sites were blocked inadvertently. Even BlogSpot and PersianBlog, two free and extremely popular blogging services, were filtered.

But ICPs were not all blocking the same websites. The government sent a long blacklist of political websites and asked ICPs themselves to filter any additional sites they felt were "inappropriate". This is the main reason for the confusion. Private ICPs, fearful of being closed down by the government, strived to be a few steps ahead of what the government demanded. Some of them filtered many additional websites, fearing the loss of huge investments they had made.

Some ICPs, controlled by the IRIB and other institutions rather than the government, have strong political backers. They did not obey government orders to use the blacklist. There is an economic rationale here: giving users access to sites that are filtered on rival ICPs ensures their service has an edge over their competitors.

Difficult questions at WSIS

In Geneva, the comments Iranians left on the Daily Summit blog about internet censorship encouraged a few BBC journalists to follow up on the story and try to ask officials about the status of freedom of expression in Iran.

President Khatami was scheduled to give a press conference later that evening, so the Daily Summit asked Iranians what they wanted to hear from their country's delegates – and dozens responded within hours by posting tough questions.

An Iranian reporter later wrote in his blog that Iranian reporters at the conference were required to register their questions beforehand, yet were denied the chance to ask it. As the conference proceeded, the summit blog reporters started to challenge the president. At one point, the president's translator failed to translate the second part of a question by an *al-Ahram* reporter about censorship.

The real controversy came later. Internet users, then journalists, publicly distributed the names of many political websites that were being filtered. An embarrassed presidential deputy in legal and parliamentary affairs, Mohammad-Ali Abtahi, wrote in his own newly-launched blog that the president "is not a liar and his remarks were based on the amount of information he had, so I prepared a list of the blocked political and news websites and sent it to him."

The day after President Khatami returned to Iran, many newspapers were talking about the WSIS scandal surrounding censorship, and especially about a remark the president made – that there is currently only *one*

journalist in prison in Iran, and that he was arrested for suspicious financial dealings, not because of his writing. Yet the organisation Reporters Without Borders has called Iran "the biggest prison for journalists in the Middle East" in their 2003 annual report.

The WSIS-effect in Iran

This was the first time that Iranians had a chance to see a live press conference taking place outside Iran. The Iranian delegation at the WSIS was not happy: the regime likes technology as long as it doesn't threaten its authority. But the delegation failed in its effort to include a defence of governments' right to restrict people's access to free information in the summit's final declaration.

The Iranian experience of the WSIS explains why the European Union and the United States should raise internet censorship among other human rights issues in their discussions with the government of Iran. Unrestricted access to the net helps democracy in countries such as Iran. The west should stop the governments of such countries closing down this unique window on the world.

Hossein Derakhshan is an Iranian freelance journalist and multimedia designer. Before moving to Canada in 2000, he wrote for Iranian newspapers about technology and society. He studies sociology at the University of Toronto, while maintaining a blog in Persian (Sardabir: Khodam / Editor: Myself) and English.

Copyright © Hossein Derakhshan, 22 January 2004. Published by openDemocracy Ltd. Permission is granted to reproduce this article for personal, non-commercial use only. In order to circulate internally or use this material for teaching or other commercial purposes you will need to obtain an institutional subscription. Reproduction of this article is by arrangement only. openDemocracy articles are available for syndication. For institutional subscriptions, syndication and press inquiries, please call ++44 (0) 207 608 2000.
