Limitations and Potential of the Internet in Journalism Practice in Iran

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ABSTRACT

Radio and television in Iran are owned and run by the government. Also, as stipulated by the Press Law, all print publications operate only under the supervision of the government. Violators under the Press Law will be tried in special courts established for such purpose. Violations include calumny,[1] blasphemy, circulating false information, propagating against the ruling body, jeopardising national security and insulting the leader. According to the Press Law enacted on 19 March 1986, "the mission of the press is to enlighten public opinion, advance the objectives of Iran, counteract internal division among citizens, propagate Islamic culture and principles, and reject manifestations of imperialistic culture as well as foreign politics and policies. Publications must not conflict with any of these enumerated goals." As stipulated by these statutes, all publications need to be licensed by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and no one may, without a license or anonymously, publish any material. Given the oppressive media environment, has the Internet offered Iranian journalists a way to break free from this political stranglehold? Has the Internet effectively offered Iranian journalists a new tool for research and, therefore, enabled them to report with greater freedom? Or, has journalism in Iran remained the way it was before the Internet became part of every day life among the Iranian people? This paper, which is drawn from interviews with journalists and media executives in Teheran, explains the limitations–and potential–of what is often assumed to be the Internet's inherent transformative influence and enabler of freer expression in general.

Keywords: Role of Internet, journalism practice, Iran

1. INTRODUCTION

We often hear of how the Internet has effectively transformed mainstream journalism practices and empowered citizens all over the world to tell their own stories via alternative online news sites and weblogs. This is a recent development in Iran where increasing numbers of journalists have put up their own weblogs in the Persian language.   Iranian journalists are using the Internet as a powerful tool for gathering news against the government. However, what we continue to read from media watch organisations such as

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[1] The Islamic Penal Code of Iran, May 22, 1996, Articles 697, 698, 700; unofficial translation at *http:/ /mehr.org/index_islam.htm*   Chapter 27 of the Penal Code on libels and revilements, and more specifically Article 698, only stipulates punishment for statements made in the press and does not cover writings in electronic format in computer and other communication systems.

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Reporters San Frontieres [2] and the Committee to Protect Journalists [3] is that local and foreign journalists continue to be repressed, and in some cases, jailed by the government for merely carrying out their work – which is, reporting critically the activities of the government and the governed.

Freedom House in its 2008 annual report on world press freedom likewise cited the Association of Iranian Journalists as stating in 2007 that "the profession has suffered in quality and financial stability since the conservative government began cracking down on independent newspapers. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has banned or closed more than 100 publications since 2000." [4]

In a special report in 2008, Freedom House also notes that: [5] "Self-censorship is extensive, particularly on political matters, and many bloggers and journalists write under pseudonyms. It is important to note that while the Iranian blogosphere and Iranian news sites do push the bounds of what is acceptable to the regime, the most socially and politically progressive sites are managed and staffed by Iranians living abroad. Since the short-lived era of relative press freedom under President Mohammad Khatami, many online intellectuals and activists have left the country. Iran's best-known bloggers–such as Omid Memarian, Roozebeh Mirebrahimi, and Shahram Rafizadeh–are now writing from foreign cities and have been sentenced to prison in absentia."

The Internet was first used in universities in Iran in 1993[6] and embraced, although cautiously, by the Iranian government after a more than decade of war with Iraq to primarily boost its research and development in science and commerce. Using the Internet to enhance civic life and more open communication in the public space has never been the government's intention. Instead, the Internet and its users have been subjected to an extensive technical filtering regime and censorship. The Iranian government continues to justify its control of the Internet by deferring to the values of Islamic culture as defined under the country's constitution, the Press Law and the Penal Code.[7]

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[2] Latest report by RSF was on the arrest of a American-Iranian freelance journalist Roxana Saberi reporting for National Public Radio (NPR) in the United States in February 2009 on charges of espionage. *http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=30815* [accessed 14 April 2009].

[3] CPJ reported that since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election in 2005, "the government has used official subsidies as a weapon against critical newspapers and magazines, according to analysts and news accounts. Reformists and critical newspapers reported losing subsidies for imported paper and equipment that remained widely available to pro-government news media". *http://www.cpj.org/2009/02/attacks-on-the-press-in-2008-iran.php* [accessed 14 April 2009].

[4] Freedom of the Press in Iran, Freedom House Annual Report 2008 *http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=251&country=7413&year=2008* [accessed 23 March 2009].

[5] Freedom on the Net: a Global Assessment of the Internet and Digital Media, Freedom House, 2008. *http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=384&key=201&parent=19&report=79*
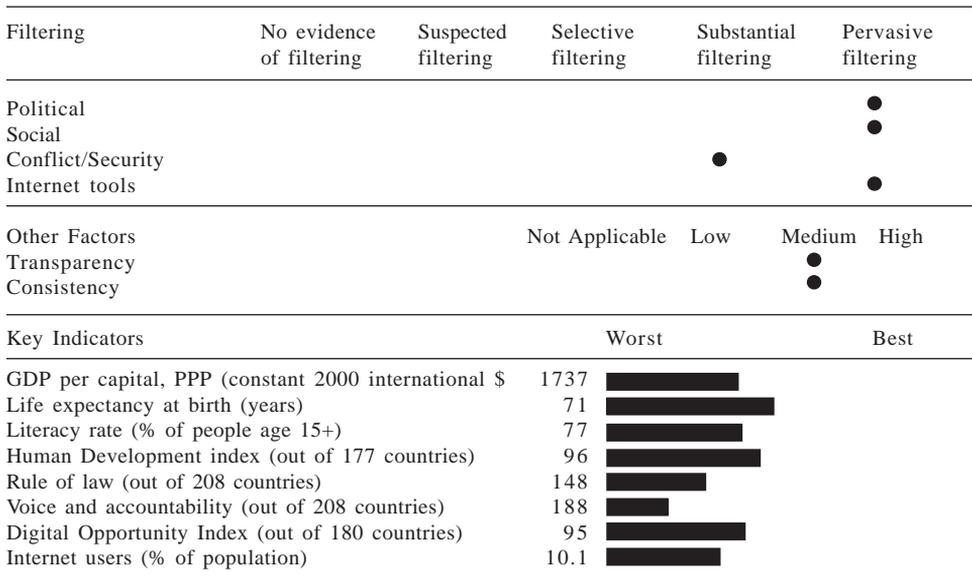
[6] Iran is the second country in the Middle-East to use the Internet, after Israel.

[7] For a comprehensive history of Internet usage in Iran, refer to Babak, Rahimi (2003), 'Cyberdissident: the Internet in revolutionary Iran, *Middle East Review of International Affairs, MERIA Journal,* Vol.7(Sept): 3. *http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2003/issue3/jv7n3a7.html* [accessed 14 April2009].

Iran is the most filtered nation in the Middle-East, if not in the world. The technology thus far is mainly used by the state to distribute political and state-sanctioned religious information to its people. This has reinforced the global impression that the Internet – and the media – in Iran are primarily used as a state apparatus (Figure 1).

The OpenNet Initiative [8] reported that since 2000, the "Iranian authorities have detained dozens of people for publishing material online. In addition, Iran has moved to contain the Internet within heightened and more explicit regulation, accommodating aggressive online censorship policies through a complex system of political networks and their affiliated government institutions."[9]

Ironically, according to the OpenNet Initiative report, Iran also boasts the highest growth in the number of weblogs in Farsi (Persian language) and Internet applications in

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political					●
Social					●
Conflict/Security				●	
Internet tools					●

Other Factors		Not Applicable	Low	Medium	High
Transparency				●	
Consistency				●	

Key Indicators	Worst		Best
GDP per capital, PPP (constant 2000 international $	1737	███████	
Life expectancy at birth (years)	71	█████████	
Literacy rate (% of people age 15+)	77	███████	
Human Development index (out of 177 countries)	96	█████████	
Rule of law (out of 208 countries)	148	████	
Voice and accountability (out of 208 countries)	188	██	
Digital Opportunity Index (out of 180 countries)	95	██████	
Internet users (% of population)	10.1	███████	

Figure 1. Profile of Internet usage and filtering in Iran, 2007
Source: OpenNet Initiative *[http://opennet.net/research/profiles/iran]*

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[8] The OpenNet Initiative (*www.opennet.net*), formed in 2002 by a consortium of universities – Cambridge, Toronto, Harvard and Oxford – is monitoring the level of Internet filtering and surveillance in more than 40 countries worldwide. China is said to be among the most notorious in filtering the Internet. Sophisticated programmes sold by Internet security companies from the West are being sold to governments in Asia to filter and censor web contents in the local language, such as Vietnamese, Mandarin, Arabic and Farsi. However, ONI has developed a "simple Internet censorship circumnavigation program" called "psiphon" which can be downloaded for free from: *http://psiphon.civisec.org/*

[9] OpenNet Initiative country study of Iran, *http://opennet.net/research/profiles/iran* [Accessed 23 March 2009].

the economic sector among Middle-East countries. Iran recorded a 7,100 % growth in its Internet usage from 2000 to 2007, according to the Internet World Statistics.[10]

The assumed inherent power of the Internet to foster freedom of the press in authoritarian regimes, such as the Middle East countries is yet to be tested. This paper hopes to address this perception in the context of repressive media realities in Iran, and identify the limitations of the Internet's liberating power on newspaper practices in Iran.

2. BACKGROUND TO PRELIMINARY STUDY

This research has been done through an analysis of responses to a qualitative survey of full-time working journalists in Tehran, and complemented by interviews with senior journalists of their experience in using the Internet in their daily work. The survey was targeted at senior journalists from the major daily papers in Tehran. They are *Iran, Tehran Times, Khaneh-e-Mellat, Hamshahri, Keyhan, Etela'at, Iran News, Entekhab, Jahan-e-Eghtesad* and *Downyaye-Egtesad.*

My investigation is a direct response to the lack of research and scant literature on the Internet's encompassing effects on the Iranian media. Knowing how the Internet is being used as a powerful tool in the Iranian newsrooms by journalists would help future researchers realistically locate the constraints that Iranian journalists face in their effort to report in public interest in a country that was seen as one of the three countries on the 'axis of evil' (together with Iraq and North Korea) according to George W. Bush's presidency in 2002.

In canvassing the views of journalists from the metropolitan dailies in Tehran, I hope to understand how they have or have not used the Internet in their daily work and the issues they face in using the technology given the current constraints: infrastructural, technical and legal obstacles to Internet access, restrictive press laws, and relatively low Internet literacy among the Iranian people.

3. SCOPE OF RESEARCH

My paper is limited to the issues faced by Iranian journalists in their usage of the Internet in their daily work. I will not delve into the history of Iranian media, the state of media freedom and censorship in Iran, although I have mentioned it briefly in the introduction. Factual information on the recent history of Internet's presence in Iran and current state of Internet usage in the country are available from these websites:

- BBC Monitoring Guide to Iranian Media and Broadcasts to Iran, March 2007: *http://www.arabmediasociety.com/UserFiles/DOCUMENTS Iran Media Guide. PDF*

- Country profile of Internet use in Iran, OpenNet Initiative: *http://opennet.net/research/profiles/iran*

- Current state of press freedom and the Internet in Iran as reported in *Reporters Without Borders* website at: *http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=10733*

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[10] Freedom of the Press in Iran, Freedom House Annual Report 2008 *http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=251&country=7413&year=2008* [accessed 23 March 2009]

- Internet World Statistics on current level of Internet usage in Iran and the Middle-Eastern countries: *http://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#ir*

- Freedom on the Net: A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media. A report by Freedom House, March 30, 2009. *http://www.freedomhouse.org/template. cfm?page=384&key=201&parent=19&report=79*

3. METHODOLOGY

A combination of methodologies was used to gather the data and qualitative information for this report. They are: questionnaire surveys, site-visits and interviews with journalists, at their workplace (questionnaire is appended).

I spent time in the respective newsrooms observing the workings of all Internet-related journalism activities. This was to gauge the extent of journalists' access to and application of the Internet in their work. This ranged from the availability of individual computer work stations and telecommunication services to Internet connectivity.

This project essentially addresses the "hands on" issues faced by the journalists, such as their easy access to infrastructure support, the economics of daily access to the Internet and their work routines that may or may not require access to the Internet. Most of the journalists and editors do not speak English.

3.1 Research Questions

1. To what extent is the Internet being adopted and used by journalists in Iranian newspapers?

2. What impediments – infrastructural, political, economic, language and cultural – do Iranian journalists face in using the Internet?

3. To what extent has the Internet empowered Iranian journalists, most of whom are not formally trained, in reporting for the Iranian people and serving their interests?

4. DESCRIPTIVE FINDINGS

Although, the publication of electronic newspapers has led to relatively more interaction between the public and journalists in Iran, the restrictive laws on Internet applications continue to prevent the development of interactive Iranian electronic newspapers as has been occurring in Egypt, Jordan and Syria.

My survey of 30 Iranian journalists point to their general perception that Iranian newspapers –although having an online presence –are not able to fully tap the potential of the Internet especially in the area of contextual reporting beyond the routine summaries of government press releases, statements and decrees. This is not so much due to their lack of skills or inadequate telecommunication infrastructure as to the restrictive media laws and threats of imprisonment if journalists break the law –Article 19 of the Regulation of the Media in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This means that Internet service providers and the

press that subscribe to these ISPs are free to publish their contents as long as they fall within state-defined permissible contents according to the state sanctioned Islamic culture.[11]

4.1 Journalists' Opinions Echo a Report by ONI on Seven Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in Iran in 2007 [12]

Outside of "immoral" content, independent and dissenting voices are filtered across a range of issues pertaining to Iran, including political reform, criticism of the government, human rights issues, and minority and women's rights. Filtering in these areas, across non-governmental organisations (NGOs), blogs, and thematic Web sites, is inconsistent and limited when content is provided solely in English, and much more substantial and complete across ISPs for sites relating to Iran or in Farsi. For example, while no independent media sites or newspapers available only in English were filtered across all ISPs tested, a large majority of similar sites relating to Iran or composed in Farsi were consistently blocked, such as *http://www.iranvajahan.net* and the publisher *http://www. kayhanpublishing. uk.com*

4.2 Freedom House's 2008 Annual Report: Usage of Internet in Iran[13]

"Iranian authorities systematically censor Internet content by forcing ISPs to block access to a growing list of 'immoral sites and political sites that insult the country's religious and political leaders'. Since the summer of 2006, the censors have focused their efforts on online publications such as *Zanestan* that deal with women's rights issues. In November of 2007, online journalist and women's rights activist Maryam Hosseinkhah was charged with disturbing public opinion, engaging in propaganda against the regime, and spreading false news. Hosseinkhah and a number of other women's activists who were charged and detained throughout the year were involved in a web campaign seeking to gather signatures in protest of Iranian laws that discriminate against women. Several Iranian news websites, such as *Emrouz*, *Ruydad*, and *Rooz Online*, were filtered. Conservative news websites were also subject to censorship. Access to international news websites and the sites of international organisations is increasingly restricted, and there are contradictory reports on the censoring of YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, and Flickr, indicating that the blocking of websites is occurring at the ISP level and not through an official ban. Nevertheless, websites continue to communicate opinions that the country's print media would never publish, with both reform advocates and conservatives promoting their political agenda. Iran's most popular blogs oppose the regime, and many bloggers publish anonymously."

Suffice to say that the Iranian government to date has one of the most sophisticated systems to censor and track the Internet for dissident voices by using "automated filtering,

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[11] For details of the legal and regulatory frameworks on Internet usage in Iran, refer to the Open Net Initiative report in 2007 at: *http://opennet.net/research/profiles/iran* [accessed 14 April 2009].

[12] ibid.

[13] Freedom of the Press in Iran*,* Freedom House Annual Report 2008 *http://www.freedomhouse.org/ template.cfm?page=251&country=7413&year=2008* [Accessed 23 March 2009].

manually produced blacklists, and active posting of pro-government information".[14]   On 26 March 2009, it was reported that Iran is contemplating a law that could impose the death penalty on bloggers who post 'offensive' material.[15]

Persian Weblog—Iran's largest and oldest provider of weblog—has been the spotlight for many Iranian youths in recent years. Persian weblogs are currently ranked fourth worldwide after English, French and Portuguese weblogs. Many weblogs in Iran are owned by youth who may find no other media to express their views.   However, the ad hoc and personal contents of weblogs have yet to prove themselves as reliable information sources for journalists.

Although weblogs have not yet become full-fledged in use as a tool in Iranian society they have been able to infiltrate different aspects of politics, economics, culture and society. There are many politicians, artists and luminaries nowadays who have developed weblogs. However, the significance of this phenomenon is that journalists have also entered this arena. The popularity of weblogs among different strata has turned them into one of the main means of communication among those who have access to the Internet.

Kazem Motamednejad, the man considered as the Iranian father of communications, is of the opinion that the new media (weblogs and websites) have encompassed all the specifications of conventional mass media. Political figures such as the former Minister of Culture and the vice-president for parliamentary affairs have turned to weblogs to express their views. Persian weblogs played an important role in the 2005 presidential elections. In this time, two presidential candidates used weblogs to seek votes during their campaign.

News and content of Persian weblogs are occasionally reproduced in the Iranian press particularly in the Persian dailies *Iran, Asia* and the recently-banned *Sharq* as well as that of the Iranian News Agency (ISNA), which has allocated a separate section under the title of *"A Look at Weblogs"* to reflect the content of Persian weblogs.

The first Persian weblog [16] was created in September 2001 by Salman Jariri. It was in the same month that the second Persian weblog [17] was developed by Hossein Derakhshan. He introduced a simple way to create a weblog in his blog. Under his instructions, it would take only a few minutes to develop a weblog. His initiative was so important that the day he published his instructions on his blog (5 November 2001) has been identified as the day in which Persian weblogs were born. Since November 2001, Persian weblogs have developed rapidly on the web. Shahrzad Fat'hi [18] and Marjan Alami[19] were the first Iranian women bloggers who created their weblog one day after the instructions were published on the web.

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[14] Walker, Christopher (2009), *Determined governments choose their Internet weapons,* Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, April 01 *http://www.rferl.org/content/Focus_on_the_Internet_in_Iran_ And_Russia/1565814.html* [Accessed 14 April 2009].

[15] Walker (2009), ibid.

[16] *www.globalpersian.com*

[17] *www.editormyself.com*

[18] *http://shahrzad.blogspot.com*

[19] *http://marjanalemi.blogspot.com*

With electronic newspapers, however, a study by Kia (2005) [20] notes that they do not provide adequate channels for interacting with readers. [21] Furthermore, most readers do not exploit the online news sites well and most of these electronic newspapers disseminate their comments to their readers poorly in their web site   Hence, Iranian electronic newspapers have not fully capitalised on the interactivity provided by the Internet to engage with their readers.

My survey of 40 journalists and newspapers in 2005 [22] found that close to 80% state that their domestic readers get information and news from the online news sites and that reporters pay attention to comments of their readers. Coupled with the inadequate online facilities in the newsroom, the potential of the Internet in freeing up newspaper practice remains unexplored.

The same picture was gathered from my interviews with 32 Iranian journalists for this paper in March 2009 (see Appendix B for list of organisations).

The earliest year that the Internet was first installed among the media organisations surveyed was 1998 at *Jamejam Daily,* the national news agency *Islamic Republic News Agency* (IRNA) and Iran Office Machine Group(IOMCO), which sells IT hardware and software.

Nearly all the 32 journalists surveyed (97%) said the Internet had given them more freedom to investigate stories, which could not have been done without this service. About a third (28%) said the medium had helped them to compare different points of view on an issue from a more global perspective.

However, while the Internet has given the journalists a sense of greater freedom to research information from global resources, in reality their work continues to be hampered by:

- poor telecommunication infrastructure and support (59%);
- language difficulties, as the main technical language is English (56%);
- inadequate Internet skills and low awareness of how online technology can improve the productivity, creativity and quality of journalistic work (44%); and
- high cost of Internet connections (40%).

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[20] Kia, Ali (2005) 'The Effects of Electronic Journalism on Press Media in Iran from the Viewpoint of Journalists'. Paper presented at *Our Media the 6th International Conference,* University of Western Sydney, 9-13 April 2007, Sydney, Australia.

[21] Note 2 of Article 1 of Iran

[22] Kia (2005) ibid. Press Law (as amended in 2000) defines electronic publications as "publications regularly published under a permanent name, specific date and serial number … on different subjects such as news, commentary, as well as social, political, economic, agricultural, cultural, religious, scientific, technical, military, sports, artistic matters, etc via electronic vehicles." Publications must also have obtained "publication licenses from the Press Supervisory Board in the Ministry of Cultural and Islamic Guidance," otherwise they "fall out of the scope of the Press law and become subject to General Laws."

Close to 31% say that the Internet has actually helped their organisations produce better quality newspapers – both in the hard copy and online versions – which 28% attribute to their access to "e-communication" with professionals, presumably their news sources.

Close to 66% of the journalists view the political filtering and restrictions by the government as a major constraint to their usage of the Internet, which is understandable given that all mass media in Iran are owned by the state. Access to overseas Persian language news sites, for example, the one hosted by the BBC, was recently blocked by a government filter. [23]

The perception of minimal government interference in the dissemination of Internet contents reveals a reality gap between what is seen from the outside and what is being experienced by journalists in their daily work. [See the Open Net Initiative report on Internet filtering in Iran as mentioned earlier].

5. CONCLUSION

- The significance of Internet usage and its full utilisation by journalists in Iran should be examined in the context of its Human Development Index (HDI) and Digital Opportunity Index (DOI) as cited in the OpenNet Initiative report. This, then should be measured against countries with similar authoritarian government controls – such as in the post-Communist countries of Vietnam and Laos, North Korea, and neighbouring Islamic countries. This will provide a more contextual picture of how Iranian journalists, and the general population are using the Internet – under the current terrestrial and cyber media laws – to bring about greater freedom of expression in the public sphere.

- The Internet, since it was first used in academia in 1993, has undoubtedly been used as a tool to disseminate information to the Iranian people – and also, equally important, to Iranians living overseas. In spite of the current laws in Iran that curtail free expression, the Internet will most likely continue to play an instrumental role in society. The question that remains is how well-trained and informed are Iranian journalists and the general population in capitalising on the enabling attributes of the Internet for the greater good.

While the Internet is no longer seen as a medium of change, given its mass application for international communication today, it certainly has certainly resulted in changes in the way journalism is practised and presented in Iran where news reports will gradually break away from its reliance on government released information to one where journalists can break their own stories via their blog sites.

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[23] BBC reported that "*BBC Persian.com* is the most popular of the BBC's non-English language websites, receiving about 30 million page impressions a month - about half of which are from inside Iran. BBC World Service radio broadcasts in English and Persian are being received by audiences in Iran as normal, as are the BBC's international online news services in English." *Iran blocks BBC Persian website,* BBC, 24 January 2006 *http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4644398.stm* [Accessed April 20, 2009].

Appendix A: Survey of Internet Usage in Newspapers in Tehran

Dear Respondent:
Thank you for participating in this survey, which aims to gather information about how journalists in Iran are using the Internet in their line of work. Your frank assessment of your work will provide us with useful insight on the issue of Internet as a tool for press freedom. The survey results will be used for a conference paper titled: *Limitations and Potentials of Internet's Impact on Journalism Practice in Iran.* The conference paper will be delivered at an international conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 29-30 May 2009.

We estimate it will take you about 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Thank you for your time.

Name of Organisation: Date:

1.   When was the Internet first installed in your organisation?
     1. [ ] 1998   5. [ ] 2002
     2. [ ] 1999   6. [ ] 2003
     3. [ ] 2000   7. [ ] 2004
     4. [ ] 2001   8. [ ] 2005

2.   Do you have access to the Internet from your own workstation?
     1. [ ] Yes
     2. [ ] No
     3. [ ] Don't know.

3.   How are current government regulations affecting your organisation's access to and dissemination of news on the Internet?
     1. [ ] Encouraging access to and dissemination of news on the Internet.
     2. [ ] Hampering access to and dissemination of news on the Internet.
     3. [ ] Government regulations have no influence.
     4. [ ] Not aware of government regulations.

4.   Does your organisation have its own policy on using the Internet?
     1. [ ] Yes (*Note: ask for a copy of this policy)*
     2. [ ] No

5.   What constraints does your organisation face in expanding the use of Internet in reporting and research? *(You can tick more than one answer)*
     1. [ ] High cost of computers.
     2. [ ] High cost of Internet connection.
     3. [ ] Staff lack training in how to use information technology.
     4. [ ] Staff lack knowledge of what the technology can do.
     5. [ ] Staff not interested in using information technology.

6. [ ] Information technology not as valuable for the organisation.
7. [ ] Poor telecommunication infrastructure and support.
8. [ ] Language difficulties as the main technical language is English.
9. [ ] Other constraints:

6.   In what ways has the Internet influenced how you report your stories?

7.   Do you feel the Internet has given you more freedom to investigate stories, and write more in-depth analytical articles, which you could not have done so without the Internet?

8.   What issues or concerns affect your work today as a journalist using the Internet in your journalism work in Tehran?

Appendix B:
Survey on Internet Usage in Newspapers in Tehran/Summary/

Name of the Organizations Surveyed: *(provide their website address)*
1.   Donaya-e Eqtesade Economic Daily
2.   Donaya-e-Eqtesad Daily
3.   Donaya-e-Eqtesad Daily
4.   Jam-e-Jam *www.irib.com/jamejam*
5.   Jamejam Daily Newspaper
6.   Islamic Republic of Iran News
7.   *Persian Writing*-Donaya-e-Eqtesad
8.   IRIB
9.   Better Life
10.   IOMCO
11.   GoldIran
12.   Tose-e