



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Censorship and the Islamic Republic: Two Modes of Regulatory Measures for Media in Iran

Babak Rahimi

The Middle East Journal, Volume 69, Number 3, Summer 2015, pp. 358-378  
(Article)

Published by Middle East Institute



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/586504>

# Censorship and the Islamic Republic: Two Modes of Regulatory Measures for Media in Iran

Babak Rahimi

*This article focuses on censorship in Iran and offers an overall view on the control of information through complex regulatory and cultural practices that make media production possible under the Islamic Republic. In contrast to conventional views of censorship as simply restricting content, this article defines two types of regulatory measures: reactive and proactive. It is argued that the latter is distinctive since it generates an environment that establishes pervasive control of what individuals or groups may be able to say or do in a public setting.*

Censorship can be broadly defined as the obstruction and the arbitrary suppression of discourse with the objective of manipulating public knowledge and, accordingly, shaping public opinion in favor of state power. Censorship is the coordinated and sometimes random effort for information management and promotion of distinct communication practices to ultimately legitimize state power through formal and informal measures, legal or otherwise, primarily with the aim to stifle dissent and prevent free diffusion of critical discourses. While democracies can and do exercise limited forms of censorship practices over certain social and political issues to preserve state legitimacy, the practice is more often identified with nondemocratic states, where management of information networks form the core of effective regulatory mechanisms.

Yet while both democratic and nondemocratic states can exercise censorship, specific to the latter, I argue, is the innovative way they can generate discourses and practices that establish pervasive control of what individuals or groups may say or do in a public setting. “Censorship,” in this sense, is not just about expurgating or restricting the flow of information, but also about the strategic production of discourses that exert discipline and order over networks of communication and the construction of knowledge favorable to the stability of state power.<sup>1</sup> The late French social theorist Michel

---

Babak Rahimi is Associate Professor of Communication, Culture and Religion at the Department of Literature, University of California, San Diego. He has been a visiting scholar at the University of Oxford, Freie Universität Berlin, and the University of Pennsylvania. Rahimi has also been the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the European University Institute, and the United States Institute of Peace. Rahimi has been an expert guest on various media, including PBS, the BBC, CNN, and NPR. His latest publication, coauthored with David M. Faris, is *Social Media in Iran: Politics and Society after 2009* (SUNY Press, forthcoming in Dec. 2015). The present work is based on a series of fieldwork studies in Iran, including during the 2009 and 2013 presidential elections. The names of some interviewees have been withheld from publication due to safety concerns. Rahimi would like to acknowledge Monroe Price, Ali Gheissari, Libby Morgan, Briar Smith, and the two anonymous reviewers for their critical commentaries on a previous version of this article.

1. Here, I am primarily criticizing the liberal/Enlightenment discourse on censorship, which has primarily focused on metaphors of “speech,” as rational discourse, and by and large associated, as Sue Jansen puts it, “as something others do: a regressive practice of un-Enlightened (non-liberal) societies.”

Foucault famously described such a conception of power not in terms of mere juridical sovereignty over the public sphere, but as the production of knowledge through a complex set of discourses and practices exercised through networks, machineries, and institutions such as asylums, clinics, and schools. Power is creative and is made meaningful in the discursive ways it confers order upon reality. Order, in the Foucauldian sense, is achieved through discourses that are set in the context of the practice of discipline and constraints, which produce new forms of social control.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I expand on typologies of communication practices in order to offer an overall view on the governmentality of information, and by extension public knowledge, through bureaucratic and cultural processes that make media production possible in the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>3</sup> The principal argument of this article is that communication practices, as a complex set of discursive schemes for the coherent implementation of long-term information management, involve the interaction of both formal and informal regulatory measures designed to perform censorial political culture and ensure state control over the contested public sphere.<sup>4</sup> Such procedures include competing policies and strategies, designed at times by factions within Iran's political order, with the aim of regulating and manipulating the production of ideas, information, images, values,

[Continued from previous page]

Sue Curry Jansen, *Censorship: the Knot That Binds Power and Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 4. With roots in European classical liberalism, debates around state censorship have carried a rationalist bias for the most part, especially the extent to which the flow of information to and from a subject or a collective entity can become cohesively manifest and give rational direction to the political life in relation to state power. While this article does not engage with the theory of censorship or ways it is understood and analyzed, it seeks to see censorship beyond the mere limits of what can be said or prevented within a binary module of state–society relations. For examples of censorship studies on the Middle East, see the following works: Trevor Mostyn, *Censorship in Islamic Societies* (London: Saqi, 2002); Moustafa Safouan, "Political Authority in the Middle East," *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 1/2 (Jul. 2003), pp. 113–19; Hussein Amin, "Freedom as a Value in Arab Media: Perceptions and Attitudes among Journalists," *Political Communication*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2002), pp. 125–35; Achim Vogt, "Regulation and Self-Regulation: The Role of Media Commissions and Professional Bodies in the Muslim World," *Political Communication*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2002), pp. 211–23; Jihad Khazen, "Censorship and State Control of the Press in the Arab World," *Harvard International Journal of Press Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1999), pp. 87–92. For the specific case of Iran, see for example, Abbas, "The Art of Censorship," *Index on Censorship*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Mar. 2012), pp. 72–79; Mette Mortensen, "When Citizen Photojournalism Sets the News Agenda: Neda Agha Soltan as a Web 2.0 Icon of Post-Election Unrest in Iran," *Global Media and Communication*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Apr. 2011), pp. 4–16.

2. See his classic work on the subject, Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Penguin Books, 1991).

3. By "governmentality of information" I refer to set of practices of control and management over how information is articulated and distributed within a population governed by a state. For Foucault's general views on governmentality, see Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–1983*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

4. By "public sphere" I refer to communicative forums, mediated or otherwise, set in everyday/nightly life wherein social relations are dramatized, made meaningful, and contested through varied forms of discourses and practices in a switching back and forth between competing network associations. See Babak Rahimi, *Theater State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran: Studies on Safavid Muharram Rituals, 1590–1641* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 83–140.

and emotions in the public sphere, which are mediated in content and meaning.<sup>5</sup> In terms of measures, I identify the development of communication processes that have progressively expanded in sophistication and mechanism of operation since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 and in the context of its factional politics with the aim to control various media, both “old” and “new.” While this study discusses various older and newer information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as print, television, cellular phones, and satellite, I focus on the Internet as a way to illustrate the construction of new censorship strategies in reaction to the increasing rise of interpersonal and interactive communication most evident with online social media.

In this article, I use Shanti Kalathil and Taylor Boas’s delineation of two types of regulatory measures: *reactive* and *proactive*.<sup>6</sup> Reactive measures, which aim to regulate media content and thus restrict the flow of information, are relatively straightforward; although there is complexity in the ways they are applied, given the role that various legal or political institutions, cultural and educational organizations and vigilante forces play to manage information. Proactive measures, although an outgrowth of the older reactive regimes of control over audiovisual mass media, are defined as active state promotion of new technological development services with the ambition to create new media content to marginalize the expression of objectionable or threatening content (as determined by the government). In the context of growing knowledge-based economic changes connected to advancements in global communication processes, the ultimate objective of the two measures is to configure the public sphere through practices of discipline and surveillance to ultimately affirm state domination.

While reactive measures typically receive the most attention by analysts,<sup>7</sup> it is in the wide-ranging proactive measures that state-led regulatory measures manifest a creative drive in producing discourses and practices for the pervasive control of what individuals, groups, or organizations may be able to say or do through mediated means in varied public settings. In theoretical terms, I define such control measures not only as distinct practices that seek to reconfigure politics through discursive fields that operate within institutions that exercise power over a population, but also as

---

5. I would like to point out that the following discussion on regulatory measures as strategic production of discourse does not directly engage with the field of “strategic communications,” which is primarily a policy-oriented and organization-based conception of information activity operated to facilitate activities of significant for long-term strategic objectives within an organization, governmental or otherwise. The proposed model is meant to go beyond the mere organizational forms of communication, which tend to ignore the socio-discursive field with wide-ranging meaning-making processes embedded in everyday life, although here I am primarily interested in public media.

6. Kalathil and Boas apply the concepts in reference to varied authoritarian regimes’ established frameworks of governance over the Internet with the objective of enforcing certain sets of practices, including self-censorship, as a way to ensure effective management of online information. This article focuses more on the creative dimensions of the regulatory processes, especially with regards to proactive measures. The rhetoric of “soft war” in the Iranian case, as I will expand later, is meant to underline the complexity of such creative regulatory processes. See Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas, *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).

7. See, for example: Arnim Heinemann, Olfa Lamoum, and Anne Françoise Weber, eds., *The Middle East in the Media: Conflicts, Censorship and Public Opinion* (London: Saqi, 2010); Jabbar Audah Al-Obaidi, *Media Censorship in the Middle East* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007).

performances by which new meanings are produced as a result of complex processes. For “censorship” here is redefined as *inventive* in the way unsanctioned information tied with emotions and social imaginaries becomes relegated through the design of new understandings, idioms, and senses of belonging that favor the state’s legitimacy and its conception of the common good.<sup>8</sup> A key component of proactive measures is the promotion of technological and scientific practices or services in public sectors as a way to bolster state power by displaying cost-effective and efficient governance. State-instituted technologies are promoted through government institutions, ministries, and other state organs, ranging from telecommunications and intelligence agencies to legal and social services. For the most part, each institution imposes its own set of regulatory practices in an attempt to deliver government services and ultimately attain legitimacy. However, I argue, not all proactive measures by such institutions are successful. This is so largely because of combined factional politics and contradictory bureaucratic apparatuses of the Islamic Republic.

In this study I also identify an *adversarial* dimension to the proactive measures. The narrative of “soft war” — a term used by Iranian officials to describe the campaign by the West and its allies to undermine the Islamic Republic through sanctions, covert activities, and cultural diffusion — is a type of proactive strategy that became prominent in what Farideh Farhi has called “the securitization of Iran’s domestic political environment” since the 2009 postelection uprisings.<sup>9</sup> Though its rhetorical use among Iranian hardline factions has declined since 2011 and, especially after the 2013 electoral victory of Hassan Rouhani, the concept continues to be applied by key institutions of governance, primarily those in charge of information production and information gathering like the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting or the intelligence units housed in various governmental branches. The adversarial aspect of the proactive measures has some similarities with the reactive measures in that both attempt to control the flow of information, but the proactive measures are distinct in the way they aim to undermine threats of perceived adversarial forces that seek to promote distrust and discord in society through misinformation, spreading rumors, “hactivism,” and psychological tactics.

Though partly propaganda, the discourse of “soft war,” as Monroe Price has explained, encourages internal disintegration and also operates through various media practices to unravel various “soft” hostilities.<sup>10</sup> In many ways, the discourse of “soft war” itself presents a way to create a new consciousness to combat a perceived enemy with the malicious intent to harm through manipulation of information. Even if we consider the term as merely a “political blunder,” as Annabelle Sreberny described it,

---

8. My position on censorship is akin to film scholar Annette Kuhn, who argued, “Censorship is not reducible to a circumscribed and predefined set of institutions and institutional activities, but is produced within an array of constantly shifting discourses, practices and apparatuses.” Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality, 1909–1925* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 127.

9. Farideh Farhi, “Electoral Miscalculations in Iran,” Wilson Center Middle East Program: Occasional Paper Series, Spring 2010, p. 15; Farideh Farhi, “The Tenth Presidential Elections and Their Aftermath,” in *Iran: From Theocracy to the Green Movement*, ed. Negin Nabavi (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 12.

10. Monroe Price, “Iran and the Soft War,” *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 6 (2012), pp. 2,397–415.

the discourse of “soft war” carries the potential to bolster state control over public media, especially over new media outlets where a battle of ideas, information, and social imaginaries continues to take place.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of operations, the two modes of regulatory measures of censorship combine police enforcement, state surveillance, and paramilitary force, and are marked by the co-optation of discourses and practices for the strategic regulation of communication. For each of the two modes the following article identifies the interaction between bureaucracies and cultures of censorship. In addition, it shows how with state-led expansion of ICT infrastructure, the Islamic Republic has adopted new censorship practices to manage and ultimately construct an effective public sphere for state legitimacy and security.

### REACTIVE MEASURES

In broad historical terms, media censorship has been primarily identified as reactive regulation, which is by far the most elaborate form of censorship in Iran. From the censorship of the country’s second-oldest newspaper, *Vaqaye’-e Ettafaqiyeh*, in 1851 under the reign of Naser ed-Din Shah (1831–96) to the jamming of satellite television and the blocking of websites, censorship has played a critical role in the suppression of domestic opposition and the management of ideas and information in the public sphere.<sup>12</sup> With each major political crisis in modern Iranian history, censorship by state institutions has increased in sophistication as challenges from dissidents have intensified. At times of crisis, in particular, censorship restrictions have deepened to the point of shutdowns or enhanced security oversight over all media. The key strategy has been to control what can be displayed in order to reinforce state power and state ideology.

In the late 1950s, for instance, when the regime of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi institutionalized a security-minded media policy in response to the political crisis that followed the nationalization of the oil industry, military officers installed as press censors and the newly established covert security force, SAVAK,<sup>13</sup> engaged in the regulation of the press and the restriction of political discourse.<sup>14</sup> These regulations included strict monitoring of content production and setting frames of acceptable expressions in a pre-revolutionary political culture environment shaped by what journalist Ryszard Kapuściński described as “ubiquitous terror”<sup>15</sup> aiming to bolster the Shah’s image and effectively “engineering consent” for the monarchy.<sup>16</sup> While the relative relaxation of media censorship in the 1970s led to various literary productions, which by extension played a role in the 1979 revolution, the years following the revolution (1979–81) saw

11. Annabelle Sreberny, “Too Soft on ‘Soft War’: Commentary on Monroe Price’s ‘Iran and the Soft War,’” *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 7 (2013), pp. 801–4.

12. Ramin Rasulof, *Nokhostinha-ye Tarikh-e Ruznameh-negari-ye Iran* [The Pioneers of the History of Iranian Journalism] (Tehran: Jameeshenasan, 1389 [2010]), pp. 70–72.

13. SAVAK is an acronym for *Sazeman-e Ettela’at va Amniyat-e Keshvar*, the Organization of Intelligence and National Security.

14. Joseph M. Upton, *The History of Modern Iran: An Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 114.

15. Ryszard Kapuściński, *Shah of Shahs*, trans. William R. Brand and Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand (New York: Vintage, 1992), p. 24.

16. Fakhreddin Azimi, *The Quest for Democracy in Iran: A Century of Struggle against Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 352.

the shutdown of numerous publications, largely a result of the crisis of revolutionary political legitimacy and the consolidation of power by Islamists. Likewise, the 2009 postelection crisis unleashed a period of sporadic shutdowns of digital networks, as Internet access was slowed down and mobile text messaging services were blocked to prevent communication between the protesters.<sup>17</sup>

In the postrevolutionary period, censorship saw a considerable decentralization as a result of the competitive factional politics of the newly established Islamic Republic, paradoxically institutionalized with the “hierarchical institutional arrangements” of the *Velayat-e Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist) political order.<sup>18</sup> The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG, or the Ershad, i.e., “Guidance,” from the ministry’s Persian name, *Vezerat-e Farhang va Ershad-e Eslami*) emerged as the main bureaucratic organ in charge of censorship of art, cinema, print, music, theater, mass media, and numerous other cultural activities. For example, the Ershad manages museums and historical sites, as well as commercial activities such as the production of advertisement and business catalogues. Since its inception, the Ershad has created a system of permits that legally allow artists, writers, publishers, and other media outlets to display their work in the public.

The process of applying for a permit depends on the field in question, and is governed by various bureau subdivisions responsible for interpreting what can be censored and what can be published.<sup>19</sup> While the theological cornerstone of the institution is based on the Qur’anic injunction to “command what is right and forbid what is wrong”<sup>20</sup> with all its associated ambiguities as a religio-cultural paradigm, the Ershad practice of interpretation is closely tied with production of what it deems “Islamic culture” through various media industries that reflect a deep interest in shaping national culture based on Islamic revolutionary ideals. Such cultural production practices have been deemed significant by the Ershad as political circumstances have changed; for example, the government promoted war-themed works with the onset of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980.

In its broad structure, the Ershad comprises a complex set of eight executive bureaus (*howzehha-ye setadi*), each in charge of managing, monitoring, approving, or promoting various artistic, cultural, and even religious affairs. As this chart from the MCIG’s website shows (see Figure I), the executive bureaus are as follows:

- (1) General Department of Supervision (*Daftar-e Vezerati*, literally “Ministry Office”), set up to analyze various problems in the fields of culture and provide technical advice to the Ministry of Higher Authority, and also in charge of ideological planning and communication policies
- (2) Center for Public Relations and Information Press  
(*Markaz-e Ravabet-e ‘Omumi va Ettela’-e Rasani*)

17. Babak Rahimi, “The State of Digital Exception: Censorship and Dissent in Post-Revolutionary Iran,” in *State Power 2.0: Authoritarian Entrenchment and Political Engagement Worldwide*, eds. Muzammil M. Hussain and Philip N. Howard (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 33–44.

18. Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), p. 36.

19. For an example of one of the guidelines for regulations governing production of videos, slides, and movies by the Ministry, see Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Vol. 3: The Islamicate Period, 1978–1984* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 189–94.

20. Qur’an 3:104, 110; 7:157; and 9:71.



- (3) Security Center (*Markaz-e Herasat*), responsible for providing moral guidance to subordinate units and organizations in the Ershad; for identifying security deficiencies, problems, and shortcomings in the areas of training, equipment, and personnel; and attempting to resolve them
- (4) General Directorate for Non-Active Defense (*Edareh-ye Koll-e Pada-fand Gheyr-e 'Amel*), in charge of implementing defense readiness plans and mobilizing civil defense units in Tehran and the provinces
- (5) Office of Performance Management (*Daftar-e Modiriyat-e 'Amalkard*), responsible for supervising the performance quality of various department field staffs
- (6) Center for Information Technology and Digital Media (*Markaz-e Fanavari-ye Ettela'at va Rasanehha-ye Dijital*), responsible for the research, planning, and development of strategic documents in the field of digital media and cultural activities, as well as the use of information and communications technology in culture and its dissemination
- (7) Office of Planning and Cultural Activities, the Arts, and Media (*Daftar-e Motala'at va Barnameh-ye Rizi-ye Fa'aliyatha-ye Farhangi va Honari va Rasaneh'i*), responsible for the development of art and cultural policy
- (8) Secretariat of the Council for Public Culture (*Dabirkhaneh-ye Showra-ye Farhang-e 'Omumi*), comprised of 33 members, in charge of setting up strategies in the provinces to protect national public culture<sup>21</sup>

In strict bureaucratic terms, each department's field staff is accountable to the minister of culture and Islamic guidance, who in turn is answerable to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah 'Ali Khamenei.<sup>22</sup> Based in Tehran, the minister would also be in a hierarchical position with MCIG branches based in provinces across the country.

In its ideal-typical formation, the Ershad maintains a vertical structure with a chain of management that begins at the top where decisions are then delegated to lower-level branches. The minister, in addition, maintains control over six executive departments, each responsible for a specific portfolio. They are as follows:

- (1) Department of the Qur'an and the Teachings of the Holy Family of Imams (*Mo'avanat-e Qor'an va 'Etrat*)
- (2) Department of Cultural Affairs (*Mo'avanat-e Omur-e Farhangi*)
- (3) Department of the Press and Information Outreach (*Mo'avanat-e Omur-e Matbu'ati va Ettela'-e Rasani*)

21. There are also two supplementary organs, (1) the Secretariat of the Central Selection Committee (*Dabirkhaneh-ye Hay'at-e Markazi-ye Gozinesh*), which provides information and reports to the central branches in the Ershad, and (2) the Secretariat of the Supervisory Committee over Cultural Affairs Centers (*Dabirkhaneh-ye Hay'at-e Residegi beh Omur-e Marakez-e Farhangi*).

22. In theory, the MCIG is also accountable to the executive branch. However, since 2007, the Ershad has come under the influence of the intelligence services and the Supreme Leader.

- (4) Department of Art Affairs (*Mo'avanat-e Omur-e Honari*), responsible for supervising artistic production, which encompasses architecture, painting, and calligraphy
- (5) Department of Legal, Parliamentary, and Provincial Affairs (*Mo'avanat-e Hoquqi va Omur-e Majles va Ostanha*)
- (6) Department of Development Management and Resources (*Mo'avanat-e Towse'eh-ye Modiriyat va Manabe'*)

All the above ministerial departments promote the policy of “guidance” through supervision. Yet each department is comprised of subunits responsible for varied executive tasks with different measures to distinct media content and production. For example, the Department of Art Affairs includes four subunits in charge of supervising visual, musical, theatrical, and artistic/cultural educational activities. Likewise, the Department of Cinema and Audiovisual Affairs serves as the main regulatory organ for film production. The security department, or *Heraset*, is the least analytical in its operations, largely in charge of maintaining “moral” behavior in public spaces of the ministry. There is also likely a shadowy department present in the ministry, possibly associated with one of the eight department branches, and, more importantly in close ties with the Ministry of Intelligence of the Islamic Republic of Iran (known by its Persian acronym VAJA)<sup>23</sup>. As Iran’s primary intelligence agency, VAJA also plays a part in the apparatus of censorship, though its exact involvement is unknown.<sup>24</sup> These informal units identify the extra-constitutional features of the Ershad, which in legal terms is meant to uphold Article 24 of the Constitution by protecting the press conditional on the principles of Islam and preservation of national independence.<sup>25</sup> The Ministry also has control over the so-called Subsidiary Organizations and Centers (*Sazmanha va Marakez-e Tabe'eh*), partner institutions that comprise organs such as the Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization (*Sazman-e Hajj va Ziyarat*). These institutions oversee and manage public activities related to religious affairs, the Islamic Republic News Agency, and publishing organizations. While independent organs, these affiliated organizations are, in a legal sense, under the supervision of the MCIG.

Cultural policies toward media censorship or production mainly reflect a complicated division of labor, with regards to visual arts, crafts, cinema, print publication, music, research, press relations, and tourism.<sup>26</sup> The core idea is to supervise and “monitor every sphere of artistic expression.”<sup>27</sup> With film and music, for example, the concerned Ershad branch, the Department of Art Affairs, adopts a tripartite policy of “support, supervision, and guidance.”<sup>28</sup> According to Ameneh Youssefzadeh, whose

23. Short for *Vezerat-e Ettela'at-e Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran*, VAJA was previously known as the Ministry of Intelligence and National Security (*Vezerat-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar*, or VEVAK).

24. Telephone interview by the author with a former member of parliament, March 11, 2013.

25. For unofficial censorship tactics in the early years of the revolution, see Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, “Of Hail and Hounds: The Image of the Iranian Revolution in Recent Persian Literature,” *State, Culture and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring 1985), pp. 159–80.

26. Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Vol. 3, p. 127.

27. *Unveiled: Art and Censorship in Iran* (London: Article 19 MENA Programme, 2006), p. 7.

28. See Ameneh Youssefzadeh, “The Situation of Music in Iran since the Revolution: The Role of Official Organizations,” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2000), pp. 35–61; and Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Vol. 3, pp. 186–87.

study is partly based on an interview by a former minister of culture, a policy of “supervision” (*nezarat*) is about controlling all cinematic or musical goods.<sup>29</sup> The core of this policy orientation is ideological and the policy serves as a way to regulate artistic expression around the nativist theme of preserving the authentic (*asil*) and traditional (*qadimi*) Iranian culture.<sup>30</sup> However, the policy practice of “support, supervision, and guidance” always entails inefficiencies of a slow bureaucratic process, regardless of which faction controls the MCIG. Bureaucratic ineptitude is evident in most fields of cultural production, including the works of classical musicians such as Mohammad Mo‘tamedi, who has publicly complained about the six-month delay to receive a *mojavez* (permit) from the Ershad.<sup>31</sup>

Regardless of the bureaucratic gridlock, the policy on music and sound recording remains as one of strictest in the MCIG. The strictness of supervision entails an intricate system of classification by compartmentalizing control over musical performance and consumption in the public. The branch in the Ershad overlooking music content and production comprise a classification system that includes the following: traditional (*sonnati*), regional (*navahi*), educational (*amuzeshi*), modified (*taghyir kardi*), new (*jadid*), global/international (*melal*), Western classical music (*kelasik-e gharbi*), and pop. The Council of Music Evaluation (*Showra-ye Karshenasi-ye Musiqi*), another subbranch in the MCIG, responsible for the classification system, consists of five elected professional musicians with Persian classical music background, as Heather Rastovac notes, “naturally leading toward a bias of this genre.”<sup>32</sup> The code system is meant, partly, to set limits for consumers in what music genres can be and should be bought in the market. Yet the coding practice also manipulates music production and consumption practices in order to exclude music deemed immoral or politically incorrect by the Council of Music Evaluation.

The *mojavez* system requires all artists, writers, publishers, directors, actors, and other media practitioners to first register with the Ershad. The registration practice is designed as an effective inspection to ensure regulated practices by various actors in the mediated public sphere. Censorship involves a wide-ranging network of actors who negotiate, interact, and contest norms of censorship in the course of production, submission, and revision of artistic and cultural products. Similar to music, for example, censorship of books also involves the interaction between the censor, publisher, and the author. The three censors responsible for book evaluations often interact with the publishers, who can be given negative points if they continue to send books to the ministry that do not meet with the censors’ approval.<sup>33</sup> Complex editorial censorship is therefore

29. Youssefzadeh, “The Situation of Music in Iran since the Revolution,” p. 43.

30. Ameneh Youssefzadeh, “Iran’s Regional Musical Traditions in the Twentieth Century: A Historical Overview,” *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2005), p. 435.

31. “Mohammad Mo‘tamedi: Chara Musiqi-ye Man Bayad Beysh az Shesh-e Mah dar Entezar-e Daryaft-e Mojavez Bemanad” [“Mohammad Mo‘tamedi: Why Should My Music Remain More than Six Months Pending a Permit”] *BBC Persian*, April 7, 2015, [www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/2015/04/150407\\_151\\_motamedi\\_music\\_album](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/2015/04/150407_151_motamedi_music_album).

32. Heather Rastovac, “Contending with Censorship: the Underground Music Scene in Urban Iran,” *Intersections Online*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Spring 2009), p.70.

33. For a detailed description of book censorship, see Saeed Kamali Dehghan, “Iran’s Supreme Leader Attacks ‘Harmful’ Books,” *The Guardian*, July 21, 2011, [www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/21/iran-supreme-leader-attacks-books](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/21/iran-supreme-leader-attacks-books). See also James Marchant, “Writer’s Block: Iranian Literary

meant to encourage the publication industry to self-regulate and ultimately self-censor.

The reactive measures adopted by the MCIG, however, have hardly maintained a cohesive and singular bureaucratic trajectory. This is primarily because of the faction-ridden and political makeup of Iranian government institutions, which often adopt varied policies to serve competing political agendas. In this light it is important to note that shifting media policies also continue to depend on the ruling administration, at times competing with other state institutions, in particular the judiciary. The Supreme Leader's role has necessitated balancing between different factions, though at times he has also directly intervened in favor of hardliners, such as the 2000 denouncement of reformists' attempt in parliament to overturn the restrictive press laws, which permit the hardliner judiciary to arbitrarily close down newspapers.

Equally important is when a government institution implements censorship, either reactive or proactive, without coordinating or even receiving approval from other institutions. This has led to some confusion over the precise legal procedure over regulating a media outlet. For example, who exactly is behind satellite jamming remains unknown to most government agencies, especially local government institutions in urban centers where residents complain of the health hazards allegedly caused by jamming.<sup>34</sup> When asked about satellite jamming and its potential negative health consequences, former minister of communications and information technology Reza Taghipour denied his ministry's involvement and was apparently unaware of who was responsible for the jamming, stated that he was "seriously" pursuing the matter.<sup>35</sup> In light of 2010 tensions between the administration of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad and the Supreme Leader, backed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, it is likely that the paramilitary force primarily in charge of the 2009 postelection satellite jamming kept the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT) in the dark about its operations.<sup>36</sup> There have also been numerous cases in the film, theater, and

[Continued from previous page]

Censorship and Diaspora Publishing," in *Revolution Decoded: Iran's Digital Media Landscape*, eds. Bronwen Robertson and James Marchant (London: Small Media, 2014), [http://smallmedia.org.uk/revolutiondecoded/a/RevolutionDecoded\\_Ch5\\_DiasporaPublishing.pdf](http://smallmedia.org.uk/revolutiondecoded/a/RevolutionDecoded_Ch5_DiasporaPublishing.pdf).

34. "Ra'is-e Komite-ye Mohit-e Zist-e Showra-ye Eslami-ye Shahr-e Tehran: Hich Nehadi dar Mowzu'-e Parazit-ha Pasokhgu Nist" ["Chair of the Tehran Municipal Islamic Council Environment Committee: No Institution in Question Is Responsible for Satellite Jamming"], *Tabnak*, Tir 10, 1391 (June 30, 2012), <http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/254796/هیچ-نهادی-در-موضوع-پارازیت-ها-پاسخگو-نیست>.

35. Since late 2012 the United States government has imposed sanctions against Reza Taghipour for his alleged role in ordering satellite jamming. See: U.S. Treasury Department, Office of Public Affairs, "Fact Sheet: Sanctions on Iranian Government and Affiliates," November 8, 2012, [www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Documents/Fact Sheet - Sanctions on Iranian Govt and Affiliates - November 8, 2012.pdf](http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Documents/Fact%20Sheet%20-%20Sanctions%20on%20Iranian%20Govt%20and%20Affiliates%20-%20November%208,%202012.pdf). For the official acknowledgment of health hazards of signal jamming, see "Vezerat-e Behdasht dar Mowred-e Asarat-e Amvaj-e Paraziti bar Salamat Gozaresh Midahad" ["Health Ministry Offers a Safety Report on the Effects of the Rise in Satellite Jamming"], *Aftab-News*, Khordad 17, 1389 (June 7, 2010): <http://aftabnews.ir/fa/news/100906/بر-سلامت-گذراش-می-دهد>. وزارت بهداشت در مورد اثرات امواج پارازیتی

36. It is important to note that Ahmadinejad removed Taghipour from his position in a major cabinet shuffle in an effort to prepare for the 2013 presidential elections. See Radio Zameneh, "Cabinet Shuffle by Ahmadinejad Seen as Prelude to Election," *Payvand Iran News*, [www.payvand.com/news/12/dec/1014.html](http://www.payvand.com/news/12/dec/1014.html). For the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' possible involvement in satellite jamming, see "Sepah-e Pasdaran Mas'ul Nasb Dakalha-ye Ersal-e Parazit" ["Guard Corps Responsible

[Continued on next page]

print industries — particularly regarding the quantity of magazines, journals, or books that could be published — where personal politics and competing political views have influenced permitted activities.<sup>37</sup>

It is also important to note that not all censorship practices lack inter-governmental coordination. During the 2013 presidential elections, the jamming of certain satellite channels (e.g. BBC Persian, Voice of America, and Manoto) intensified on election day (June 14), from 10 AM through 1 AM the following day.<sup>38</sup> The time was scheduled to prevent possible interference with the domestic banking information infrastructure, which also begins its operations in the morning and relies on the satellite communication system, though operating through a separate telecommunication network.<sup>39</sup> In 2013, during the month of Ramadan, when the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting would show some of its most popular TV programs at night, popular Turkish soap opera shows on the Dubai-based General Entertainment and Media satellite channel, which aired at the same time, were heavily jammed in Tehran and other major cities.<sup>40</sup>

The absence of a clear censorship policy and bureaucratic process to implement existing regulative mechanisms is best demonstrated by the state's uncoordinated reaction to the development of the Internet, especially during its early stages of popularity among the younger generation and dissidents in the late 1990s. The initial censorship regime, primarily manifested in its reactive form, came under the control of the judiciary and the Ministry of Post, Telephone, and Telegraph (renamed the MCIT in 2003), implementing various — and at times contradictory — measures to control the Internet. Nevertheless, the focus of Internet policy revolved around regulatory practices such as blocking and filtering that targeted Internet service providers (ISPs) as a way to outsource control over content and interaction online.<sup>41</sup> In what Guobin Yang calls the “mediaization of the Internet,” many early regulatory practices that were implemented over the Internet were based on previous laws applied for mass media.<sup>42</sup> The simple extension of these earlier laws can be explained in light of the state's initial inability to manage the social dimension of the new technology, as the Internet first began to be incorporated in the educational sphere, and hence perceived as a “scientific” technology instead of a potentially journalistic or political phenomenon.

■  
[Continued from previous page]

for the Building of Transmission Towers for Satellite Jamming”], Melliun Iran website, Shahrivar 5, 1391 (August 26, 2012), <http://melliun.org/iran/7197>.

37. Phone interview, former parliament member, March 11, 2013. See also, Sussan Siavoshi, “Cultural Policies and the Islamic Republic: Cinema and Book Publication,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Nov. 1997), p. 525.

38. Fieldwork observation, June 7–22, 2009, Tehran.

39. Interview by the author with a bank representative, June 30, 2013, Tehran.

40. References to frequent satellite jamming were made in numerous interviews conducted during my fieldwork in Tehran during July/August 2013. The interviews were not limited to residents of the capital, but included individuals who live in other cities such as Isfahan, Shiraz, and Tabriz, who all reported similar jamming experiences.

41. Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany, *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), pp. 61–86.

42. Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 50. The Press Law of 1986 served as the principle legal source for the regulation of the Internet in the earlier period, followed by the 2000 amendment to the Press Law, which was a reaction to the growing dissident activism in print media.

The 2001 ratification of the comprehensive set of decrees by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (SCRC), an extra-constitutional institution founded in 1984 and dominated by conservatives, initiated a more centralized system of regulatory frameworks through the employment of filter systems by ISPs.<sup>43</sup> However, the system was ultimately not implemented; instead parliament ratified legislation that would legally require ISPs to filter access to sites they deemed “immoral.” In June 2003, the judiciary stepped up censorship measures over the Internet and called for the SCRC to expand a filtering regime that would also include political content.<sup>44</sup> The judiciary’s concerns about the political impact of the Internet were matched with continuing tensions between reformists and conservatives in the last years of Mohammad Khatami’s presidency (1997–2005). According to a report by the OpenNet Initiative, by 2004/5, Iran’s Internet filtering system increased in sophistication as more Persian-language content was more consistently blocked.<sup>45</sup> The implementation of other regulatory measures also included the 2006 reduction of Internet speed to 128 kilobits per second as a way to slow down activity on the emerging social media sites that would enable users to download and forward photos and videos online. In 2009, Iran’s press laws were again revised to regulate online content produced by bloggers and journalists. “Internet publications” (*entesharat-e interneti*), now a legal term used in the censorship regime’s discourse, had to obtain a permit for publication just as newspapers did.<sup>46</sup>

As a way to remedy bureaucratic incoherences, reactive censorship under the Islamic Republic has seen two major developments. First, there has been the attempt to create a closed system of information in reaction to the growing use of new media. The formation of national intranets would allow user activity and content production to potentially fall under full state surveillance without the need for an elaborate system of censorship.<sup>47</sup> The establishment of a national information network can also allow the development of “domestically developed applications and services” with the potential for a tight surveillance system over all Internet media activities.<sup>48</sup> Alongside military intelligence and government intranets to protect the country’s nuclear computer domains against cyber attacks, a civilian version of a national intranet, largely hidden from outside of Iran, could severely limit production of content and regulate interactivity online.<sup>49</sup>

43. OpenNet Initiative (ONI), “Iran,” in *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace*, eds. Ronald Deibert, John Palfrey, Rafal Rohozinski, and Jonathan Zittrain (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), p. 548.

44. Steve Fairbanks, “Judiciary Spokesman Explains Website Filtering,” in *Iran Report*, Vol. 6, No. 25 (June 16, 2003), [www.rferl.org/content/article/1342739.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342739.html).

45. ONI, “Internet Filtering in Iran in 2004–2005: A Country Study,” <http://opennet.net/studies/iran>.

46. ONI, “Iran,” pp. 549–50.

47. Since it is unlikely that an intranet service can completely close off Iranians the global Internet, the Iranian national network, similar to the Chinese model, would most likely operate parallel to other Internet services like Google and Yahoo! The potential benefit of an intranet would be its appeal to a domestic Internet consumer market for providing services specific to Iranians.

48. “Iran’s National Information Network,” *The Citizen Lab* (blog), Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto, November 9, 2012, <https://citizenlab.org/2012/11/irans-national-information-network/>.

49. Collin Anderson, “The Hidden Internet of Iran: Private Address Allocations on a National Network,” working paper, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, NY, September 28, 2012, <http://arxiv.org/pdf/1209.6398v1.pdf>. For various stages in the implementation of a “national information network,” see “*Taqipur: Rahandazi-ye Kamel-e Shabakeh-ye Melli-ye Ettala’at ta Payan-e Barnameh-ye Panjom* [“Taghipour: The Complete Launch of a National Information Network before the End of the Fifth Plan”], Islamic Consultative Assembly News Agency, Aban 10, 1391 (October 31, 2012)

[Continued on next page]

The final features of reactive regulation include various unofficial censorship practices.<sup>50</sup> These measures are elusive, shadowy and, given their informal nature, difficult to examine in a study of systematic regulation of the media. They are largely carried out by pro-government pressure groups (termed *goruhha-ye feshar* in Persian) who are loosely associated with the state and remain loyal to hardliner factions. Unofficial measures of control include manipulation of venues for media production and their strict regulation. As in the case of film, unofficial modes of censorships attempt to stymie promotional strategies by restricting the number of screening venues or failing to send films deemed problematic to festivals for competition.<sup>51</sup> Quasi-official censorship has also involved the regulation of the offline production of knowledge such as research and academic activities through print media. It is in the combination of shifting official and unofficial measures that the reactive operations have been effective in regulating cultural productions under the Islamic Republic.

### PROACTIVE MEASURES

Proactive measures are, in part, about soft power. They are designed to influence the development of media, in particular new media, in order to serve specific economic or political objectives in favor of state power. The objective is also one of persuasion; in other words, shaping perceptions, behavior, and sentiments of solidarity and prosperity as the network grows with the expansion of global media technologies. Unlike reactive measures, proactive censorship seeks not to limit but to promote technologies in ways that are favorable to the state, expanding the “network effect” to support the state. While such measures acknowledge media’s relevance to economic and political stability, they also recognize the long-term impact in the promotion of distinct communication media, particularly emerging technologies, can have on political stability.

Proactive measures go beyond propagating an ideology; they build perceptions of legitimacy and cultivate trust in the state. As Joseph Nye describes, soft power is about “credibility, and when governments are perceived as manipulative and information is seen as propaganda, credibility is destroyed.”<sup>52</sup> This aspect of credibility can be identified with various promotional policies institutionalized in government ministries such as the Ershad and its affiliate organs. In the case of film, as Hamid Naficy explains, the Farabi Cinema Foundation — created in 1983 as an independent institution under Ershad supervision and charged with the implementation of the guidance (*hedayat*) and support (*hemayat*) policies — has provided financial support, helped facilitate technological or technical assistance, and promoted films approved by the ministry.<sup>53</sup>

[Continued from previous page]

[www.icana.ir/newspage.aspx?Newsid=210363](http://www.icana.ir/newspage.aspx?Newsid=210363), “Ejra-ye Bakhsh-e Jadid-e Shabakeh-ye Melli-ye Interneti: Rahandazi-ye Shabakeh-ye Melli Salamat va Amuzesh” [“The Implementation of a New Part of the National Internet Network: Launch of the National Network Is Safe and Educational”], Mehr News Agency, Mehr 11, 1391 (October 2, 2012), [www.mehrnews.com/detail/News/1710012](http://www.mehrnews.com/detail/News/1710012).

50. I would like to thank Briar Smith for suggesting “quasi-official” as a way to describe this form of reactive censorship.

51. Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Vol. 3, pp. 154–55.

52. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), p. 83.

53. Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Vol. 3, pp. 127–29.

Similarly, despite deep mistrust of theater in the early years of the revolution, the state-funded Fajr International Film Festival serves as a major promotional platform of Iranian-made dramatic arts and a means of bolstering perceptions about domestic artistic development supported by the government.<sup>54</sup> Through promotional strategies such as the launch of an English-language website and news reports on national TV or satellite channels funded by the government, the Fajr festival provides what Joseph Nye referred to as an “enabling environment” for building positive public opinion.<sup>55</sup>

The development of the Internet in Iran also exemplifies a proactive policy. The Internet was first introduced in the mid-1990s with the support of the educational and scientific sectors.<sup>56</sup> Much of government’s encouragement for new media in the post-Iran-Iraq War era focused on the growth of educational centers and scientific knowledge. In this regard, the promotion of other new media technologies — fax, cell phones, and satellites — was directly linked with the economic and information infrastructure reforms led by the administration of President ‘Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–97), which saw significant progress in activity by 1995, when the Internet slowly entered the domestic market.<sup>57</sup> As economic growth expanded, the government faced new challenges as it sought to respond to the needs of a changing demographic landscape and a growing educated class of men and women in their early 20s. In light of an expanding globalized media landscape, public policy aimed to show good and modern governance in the promotion of scientific and information technologies. The Internet became both the material source and the symbol of a new modernization epoch, during which the luxury of new technologies, mostly produced in the West, could be dispersed among the younger population through the educational system.

Although reactive measures were still in operation during Rafsanjani’s presidency, in many ways the relaxation of control over cultural and media activities heralded a new wave of government intervention through the adaptation and improvement of information technologies. Effectively, the aim was to balance reactive measures with the official encouragement of media products such as cell phones and the Internet, along with the promotion of a domestic information technology industry that would be in line with the state ideology. Four major proactive phases can be identified here. First, in the heyday of the revolutionary years, the promotion of Iranian-made artistic goods, media products, and industrial technologies aimed to set the public policy agenda in building an advocacy network by influencing and affecting the perception of actors both at home and abroad.

The second phase began in the reformist period (1997–2005) and the early years of Ahmadinejad’s presidency (2005–8), when the digitization of governance with the rise of electronic government (e-government) and electronic commerce (e-commerce) helped project the regime’s soft power and an information environment conducive to

54. *Unveiled*, pp. 27–29.

55. Nye, *The Future of Power*, pp. 94–100.

56. Babak Rahimi, “The Politics of the Internet in Iran,” in *Media, Culture and Society in Iran: Living With Globalization and the Islamic State*, ed. Mehdi Semati (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008), pp. 37–56; Niki Akhavan, *Electronic Iran: The Cultural Politics of an Online Evolution* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), pp. 13–14.

57. Farhad Khosrokhavar, “Iran’s New Scientific Community,” in *Contemporary Iran: Economy, Society, Politics*, ed. Ali Gheissari, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 211–44.

state interests. Electronic governance is one of the key proactive measures that promoted and legitimized the state and helped shape the online landscape. By mid-2005 Iranian e-government became widespread and involved the creation of new public administrative provisions ranging from embassies and libraries to passport and tourist services.<sup>58</sup> In addition, e-commerce, in particular in the banking sector, has provided both financial efficiency and legitimacy for the state, seeking to keep pace with the burgeoning public sector and the consumerist society in the late Khatami period.

The third phase is the state's policy toward Internet services, which has both proactive and reactive aspects. The institutionalization of a national intranet, discussed earlier, may seem to be solely a reactive means to close off and restrict the flow of information and hamper the interactive culture of social media. However, the state's ability to create a closed information network should be seen as closely in line with the attempt in the mid-2000s to promote technology as a way to legitimize governmental efficacy and encourage commerce, scientific, and even intra-governmental activities for development. In many ways, the project of nationalizing the Internet illustrates the state's recognition of how information technology figures prominently in the modernization of Iran's economy, education system, and military.

In a significant way, proactive measures are about building resources, institutions, platforms, and legal frameworks for active government and for expanding social control through various media technologies. State-endorsed discourses of innovation and technological development in various civic and government institutions may seem typical of any modernization scheme, but they also enable the Islamic Republic to successfully engage with information and technology without being overwhelmed with an elaborate system of reactive regulations. As a final example, privatization of new media may seem to be a way to encourage private-sector accountability, but in reality such schemes are only possible in state-approved forms to control the flow of information while appearing to deregulate through liberalization and hence seem less centralized.

In the fourth phase, proactive measures become adversarial. The trope of "soft war," signifies a set of discourses and practices meant to portray media as perceived "foreign" entities. The "soft" in "soft war" underlines both an implicit and explicit conflict over cultural norms or values of a native population and the state as its protector. The "soft war" is adversarial since it engages with media as a threat on its own. As a strategy, as Niki Akhavan has argued, the aim is to both "wage and fight" a soft war.<sup>59</sup> Waging the soft war actively involves diverse disruptive, coordinated, and co-optive efforts through, what Price called, "information-related measures."<sup>60</sup> The Iranian government has used the narrative of "soft war" to undermine foreign-directed media initiatives that portray and reinforce a negative view about Iran and seek to disintegrate the "value" system and moral order of the country from within. Meanwhile, the key component of soft strategic communication can be described as the reframing of information and the rechanneling of misinformation to bolster state stability from media representations that can potentially promote discontent in the country.

58. Nancy Beygijanian and John V. Richardson, Jr., "E-Government in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Reaching Out to the World?" *IFLA Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Mar. 2008), pp. 20–33.

59. Akhavan, *Electronic Iran*, p. 96.

60. Price, "Iran and the Soft War," p. 2,401.

Collective consciousness is what is at stake in the soft war strategy. As Brigadier General Yahya Rahim-Safavi, the former head of the Revolutionary Guards explains, the “main aim of the enemy’s soft war is to change the values and beliefs of the Islamic Revolution of Iran,” a cultural incursion through intelligence gathering for hostile purposes.<sup>61</sup> Framed as a countermeasure against perceived foreign (mostly American) soft-power strategies to encourage the overthrow of the regime, the adversarial form of proactive measures targets media — in particular interactive media such as the Internet — as a threat and seeks to co-opt the same media to defuse its force by disrupting, redefining, and reframing the media’s content.

As an active communication strategy, “soft war” entails two important interrelated dimensions. First, as a distinctive strategy, “soft war” is about the *production* of knowledge, recycled or new, about a perceived foreign threat against the nation through “soft tools” such as mobile devices, the Internet, and satellite TV. Second, such strategic communication as a counter-measure to a perceived foreign-led “soft war” involves the tactical move of *disruptive* means to redirect the flow of information so as to make it ineffective. Framing plays a key role in both dimensions. The “agenda-setting” or “agenda-framing” practices of “soft war” are similar to what Nye has described when actors preclude “the choices of others by exclusion of their strategies.”<sup>62</sup> Agenda framing, in the context of a “soft war” strategy, is about inventive ways that state media outlets can promote “rival” propaganda or “neutralize” the impact of propaganda against the Islamic Republic. Newly produced knowledge, couched in the language of “soft war” can be effectively disseminated against a perceived threat for media consumption on both domestic and international levels.

The term “soft war” (*jang-e narm*) was first used in August 2009, nearly three months after the contested presidential election, during a speech in which Supreme Leader Ayatollah ‘Ali Khamenei encouraged the Iranian student body, described as “young officers,” to seek new ways to fight against the enemy and maintain a “positive outlook” in dealing with the “the front of the soft war” (*jabbeh-ye jang-e narm*).<sup>63</sup> In another major speech in September 2009, Ayatollah Khamenei warned artists and teachers that they were facing an “atmosphere of sedition,” which required them to be vigilant against the alleged plots of domestic and foreign enemies.<sup>64</sup> The objective, according to Khamenei, was to promote policies and provide guidelines to confront the ongoing “soft war” waged by foreign powers through the Internet and media outlets such as BBC Persian and VOA, which supposedly undermine the morality and collective spirit of the Iranian nation. Nonetheless, the security framework of the rhetoric of “soft war” lies in the very media technologies required to be restructured to influence action on a collective level.

Of course, this was not the first time the Supreme Leader had referred to a non-military or “soft” conflict. In March 2009, on the Persian New Year and months before the June elections, Ayatollah Khamenei spoke of “psychological warfare” being waged

61. “Soft War Targets Revolution’s Values,” *PressTV*, Bahman 27, 1389 (February 16, 2011), <http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/fa/165505.html>.

62. Nye, *The Future of Power*, p. 129.

63. *Jang-e Narm* [The Soft War] (Tehran: Cetus, 1392 [2013]), p.16.

64. Robert F. Worth, “Iran Expanding Effort to Stifle the Opposition,” *The New York Times*, November 23, 2009, [www.nytimes.com/2009/11/24/world/middleeast/24iran.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/24/world/middleeast/24iran.html); Nima Adelhah, “Iran Integrates the Concept of the ‘Soft War’ into Its Strategic Planning,” *Jamestown Foundation: Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 8, No. 23 (June 12, 2010), pp. 7–9.

by foreign foes so to inject “fear” and weaken Iran’s “general will.”<sup>65</sup> The “psychological” descriptor underlines an essentially cultural warfare that aims at “replacing” the institutions and values of the Iranian nation with Western ideals.<sup>66</sup> The best way to confront this “soft” threat is to create “cultural trenches” (*sangarha-ye farhangi*) to defend the nation against such value-oriented form of conflict.

Since 2009, various institutions including state-funded media outlets, have developed new units devoted to “soft war” activities. Though since 2011, the rhetoric has mellowed, most likely due to the decreasing level of internal threats after major crackdowns on the Green Movement, which led protests against the reported results of the 2009 elections.<sup>67</sup> For example, Fars News, a conservative news agency which has been dominated by the state’s intelligence service since 2008, hosts a subfield of “public policy and soft war” news with articles about the “soft war” and new technologies.<sup>68</sup> Likewise, in the print domain, various state-affiliated publishers based in Tehran and Qom, the historic center of Shi‘a religious learning, have published numerous books on the alleged soft war being waged by foreign entities with the aim of bringing “awareness” to the public of an impending external threat that manifested itself with the foreign-led attempt in 2009 at a “velvet revolution” (referring to an event like the 1989 nonviolent protests that overthrew the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia).<sup>69</sup> On the international level, Iran’s launch of the 24-hour, English-language news channel Press TV and the Spanish-language news channel Hispan TV set the stage for multilingual media on a global scale competing with Sunni/Arab channels such as Al Jazeera and Western channels such as BBC, CNN, or Euronews. The key operation of these international press agencies is to actively engage in the production of state-sanctioned news that would also undermine “Western news” with its assumed anti-Iranian bias.<sup>70</sup>

Knowledge production is ultimately an innovative process, an attempt to create awareness, to promote an official interpretation, and correspondingly frame key “narratives.” Through print or electronic publications, the objective is to create a new framing strategy through rhetorical devices and cultural institutions, to set a new agenda for the public, and also to reacquaint the public, especially youth, with the combative, revolutionary spirit of the Islamic Republic.<sup>71</sup> This measure has been

65. *Jang-e Narm* [Soft War], p.16.

66. *Jang-e Narm* [Soft War], p.15.

67. It is unclear whether funding for the “soft war” has declined, given the decreasing use of the term in the official state media. However, numerous official websites continue to refer to the “soft war” in reference to social media and new media technologies, specifically regarding the 2009 post-election uprising (or what is officially known as “*fetneh*,” or disorder). For a study of the “soft war” and its development since 2009, see Niki Akhavan, “Social Media and the Islamic Republic,” in *Social Media in Iran: Politics and Society after 2009*, eds. David M. Faris and Babak Rahimi (New York: SUNY Press, forthcoming 2015).

68. “*Goruh-e Didgah: Rasaneh va Jang-e Narm*” [“Viewpoint: Media and the Soft War”], Fars News Agency, [www.farsnews.com/viewpoint/media](http://www.farsnews.com/viewpoint/media).

69. In 2013, for example, the Cetus imprint published a multilayered, lengthy study of soft war by a number of anonymous analysts. Such production is an indication that an audience within the Islamic Republic continues to seriously engage with the concept of “soft war.”

70. Confidential interview by the author with a journalist, July 17, 2013, Tehran.

71. Adelkhah, “Iran Integrates the Concept of the ‘Soft War’ Into its Strategic Planning.”

mostly evident in the sharp rise of publications since 2009 on “soft war” theory and practice by major archival and publication institutions such as the Archival Center for Islamic Revolution.<sup>72</sup> However, “soft war” requires a countermeasure targeting academia, the intelligentsia, and the publication industry, which allegedly seek to undermine the values of Iran’s revolutionary Islamic culture. Organizations such as the Soft Security Strategic Think Tank — run by the Basij paramilitary force’s branch in Khajeh Nasir Toosi University of Technology, in northern Tehran, and closely connected with the intelligence services — have led the charge in clamping down on leading publishing houses for allegedly producing work deemed written to overthrow the state.<sup>73</sup> On an institutional level, “soft war” operates not just as propaganda, but also as a defensive measure in a securitized context.

These types of creative measures should be viewed along with “offensive measures” that involve disruptive attempts to redirect “soft” attacks made through mass media and online social networks. Numerous overstatements of Iran’s military technology, engagement with cyberspace in building new pro-government social network sites, or defining diplomatic encounters from Europe or the United States as “psychological warfare campaigns” serve as few examples in how “soft war” is employed as both discourse and practice largely by security apparatus of the Iranian state.<sup>74</sup> *Afsarane Jang-e Narm* (literally, the Officers of the Soft War), a student group devoted to the cause of “soft war,” maintains profiles on the Persian-language social networking site Facenama.<sup>75</sup> The group exemplifies the type of organization that both uses the concept of “soft war” as a rhetorical device and the basis of a social mobilization, with the potential to build a virtual online community to tackle a perceived foreign threat with the same social network operations as Facebook or Google+.

There is an element of secrecy regarding the practice of “soft war,” perhaps reflecting the clandestine nature of this type of communication warfare. In the print media, for example, news agencies like Fars News fabricate reports, spread misinformation, and co-opt media practices or headlines from opposition media to set new schemes of perception and interpretation for the public about adversarial actors, especially the opposition — who are at times depicted as foreign agents operating in the country.<sup>76</sup> On satellite TV, coordinated efforts by callers using fake names on a Persian call-in show on VOA to attempt to disrupt discussion on various political topics through the subtle use of questions and polemical statements.<sup>77</sup> In cyberspace, parallel websites, social networking sites, or online news sites co-opt content frames or create new media discourses; at times these sites have mockingly reversed their

72. On government commissioning of print publication, see Mostafa Khalaji, Bronwen Robertson, Maryam Aghdami, *Cultural Censorship in Iran: Iranian Culture in a State of Emergency* (London: Small Media, 2011), pp. 12–17.

73. Golnaz Esfandiari, “Leading Iranian Publishers, Writers Accused of Attempting to Overthrow Islamic Establishment,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 11, 2011, [www.rferl.org/content/iran\\_publishers\\_accused\\_of\\_attempting\\_overthrow/2272991.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/iran_publishers_accused_of_attempting_overthrow/2272991.html).

74. Adelkhah, “Iran Integrates the Concept of the ‘Soft War’ Into its Strategic Planning.”

75. See <http://facenama.com/afsaranejangenarm>.

76. “*Rasaneh va Entekhabat*” [“The Media and the Elections”], *Ofogh*, VOA, May 6, 2013, <http://ir.voanews.com/media/video/1655589.html>.

77. Telephone interview by the author with Iranian-American journalist, Negar Mortazavi, November 5, 2012.

names, for example, turning US-funded Radio Farda (literally Radio Tomorrow) to Radio Dirooz (literally Radio Yesterday) so to undermine the symbolic legitimacy of a particular media group. In its most combative manifestation, hacktivist practices, mostly mimicking the Green Movement's tactics in the aftermath of the 2009 elections, are employed to reframe opposition media content. For instance, the Cyber Army, an intelligence unit and hacker group, is charged with the distinct responsibility of hacktivism, defacing websites of dissidents and foreign news or social media sites like Twitter.<sup>78</sup> The combative hacktivist operations entail the logic of breaking into the system of a perceived adversary to undermine the stability of the website as a political platform for dissident activities.

Despite the waning of "soft war" rhetoric in official discourses during the later period of Ahmadinejad's presidency, and in particularly since the 2013 elections with the election of Rouhani, the continued presence of security-oriented strategies led by government-units like the Cyber Army partly bespeaks of a soft strategy that increasingly relies on emerging media technologies for information management. The rhetoric and practice of soft war, in this sense, is not just about adopting a new communication strategy, but populating "Islamic" discourses on new media. The aim is to reframe public discourse through social technologies that are deemed value-laden communication tools. While the Internet and mobile media have posed the largest perceived serious threat to state security, mostly evident during the 2009 uprisings, what has rendered new media distinct is the simultaneity of information dissemination and the capacity to manipulate mass communication. This participatory feature of censorship appears to be a far more effective way to engage with communication governance and, accordingly, managing risks through social networking applications.

## CONCLUSION

Elaborating on the current state of publication in the country, Iranian film director and screenwriter Nasser Taghvai describes his experience with censorship in terms of a major internal conflict. "This censorship," he argues, "has been so resilient and public that [it] has made everyone's mind defective," continuing to describe this defectiveness a result of the constant presence of censorship that ultimately impacts his films' production in significant ways.<sup>79</sup> Taghvai's comment is noteworthy since it not only shows how censorship not only restricts expression, but in fact influences how people put forward and regulate their own discourse, often self-censoring in the process. Ordinary actors, who perform regulations in their everyday lives, carry out

78. Scott Peterson, "Twitter Hacked: 'Iranian Cyber Army' Signs Off with Poem to Khomeini," *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 18, 2009: [www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2009/1218/Twitter-hacked-Iranian-Cyber-Army-signs-off-with-poem-to-Khomeini](http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2009/1218/Twitter-hacked-Iranian-Cyber-Army-signs-off-with-poem-to-Khomeini). For a study of the bureaucracy of Internet censorship, see "Iran's Internet Censorship: New Infographic Illuminates Administrative Maze," *CGCS MediaWire* (blog), Center for Global Communication Studies, March 27, 2013, [www.global.asc.upenn.edu/irans-internet-censorship-new-infographic-illuminates-administrative-maze](http://www.global.asc.upenn.edu/irans-internet-censorship-new-infographic-illuminates-administrative-maze).

79. "'Man 'Omr-e Abadi Daram': Goftegu-ye Ekhtesasi-ye Tajrobeh ba Naser Taqvayi beh Monasabat-e 72 Salegiyash" ["'I Have an Eternal Life': Tajrobeh's Exclusive Conversation with Naser Taghvai for His 72<sup>nd</sup> Birthday"], *Tajrobeh*, Vol. 22, No. 99 (1392 [2013]), p. 28.

these discursive interventions, and in doing so reproduce state power in their own artistic or cultural activities. While subversive practices can undermine the regulation of expression, diverse forms of censorship practices in their reactive or proactive forms are thus not to be seen simply as ways of repressing public discourse, but creating new desires, tastes, and forms of interaction and socialization that define a community in which regulation is implemented.

This article has provided a broad, though not a comprehensive, study of censorship practices under the Islamic Republic by primarily identifying their mechanisms of censorship, but not their impact on Iranian society. The two salient censorship schemes I outlined either showed how media restrictions are imposed (reactive) or promoted through “home-grown” media strategies for effective impact in legitimizing state power (proactive). They serve as ideal types, and yet they identify the workings of a complex state power that, paradoxically, views culture and media as both assets and potential threats for its security.<sup>80</sup> The dynamics of media strategies to bolster state power involve both restrictive control and active adoption of new technologies and policies that ensure the state participates with global practices of media governance. In a significant sense, the discourse of “soft war” might be specific to Iran, but it resembles other proactive censorship practices implemented, for instance, in the Soviet Union when Communist society was similarly depicted as vulnerable to the infiltration of foreign ideas and values. Such adversarial proactive schemes, often portray society as a passive and an easily manipulated entity that requires an aggressive cultural policy adopted by the state to protect it.

What complicates regulating communications are the specific reasons and their effectiveness in making censorship practices possible in shifting sociopolitical contexts. The efficiency, in turn, is dependent on how meaningfully actors perform regulated expressions through changing media technologies. Censorship practices can fail precisely because public discourse can also fail. The possibility of breakdown in a censorship web of practices, self-regulative or otherwise, is explicitly evident in ways public discourses can be open to multiple performances, which, accordingly, can open up spaces wherein actors can provide alternative discourses, ones that transgress boundaries and reconfigure the norms of expression. Censorship is more than the exclusion of certain information, and is rather the creative negotiation with framing practices to (re)produce information through elaborate and complex practices of governance over the management and regulation of media publics.




---

80. Monroe E. Price, *Media and Sovereignty: The Global Information Revolution and Its Challenge to State Power* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), pp. 3–29.