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# Outside In: The Practices of Iranian Diaspora Journalists

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# Outside In: The Practices of Iranian Diaspora Journalists

## **Abstract**

The Iran Media Program (IMP) conducted a survey of Iranian journalists living and working outside Iran. The IMP's aim was to examine more closely the role and relationship between Iranian reporters abroad and their international and domestic audiences, as well as to broaden our knowledge of the Iranian diaspora media culture.

With this report, the IMP hopes to contribute new insights regarding the transnational dimensions of Iranian journalism, as well as how Iranian journalists working outside Iran view their roles within and perspectives on the broader Iranian media ecosystem. The IMP's research adds to a growing body of knowledge regarding the dynamics of Iran's domestic media environment and news-consuming public.

## **Disciplines**

Communication | International and Area Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies

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# OUTSIDE

**IN** ■ The Practices and Perceptions  
■ of Iranian Diaspora Journalists

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*Winter 2013*

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The Iran Media Program is a collaborative network designed to enhance the understanding of Iran's media ecology. **Our goal is to strengthen a global network of Iranian media scholars and practitioners and to contribute to Iran's civil society and the wider policy-making community by providing a more nuanced understanding of the role of media and the flow of information in Iran.**

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# Executive Summary

**An estimated three to five million Iranians have left Iran since 1979, in two major waves of emigration: the first and largest, during the political and economic turmoil in the decade following the Revolution; and the second, as a result of the state's crackdown on opposition groups and media outlets following the 2009 election.<sup>1</sup>**

The repression of Iranian journalists under the Ahmadinejad regime (2005–2013) put an international spotlight on the restrictive conditions in which media operate in Iran. In the aftermath of the mass protests against Ahmadinejad's contested electoral victory in 2009, authorities closed dozens of opposition outlets and arrested hundreds of journalists and bloggers for fomenting the anti-government uprisings.<sup>2</sup> According to Reporters Without Borders, Iran in 2010 had the second-highest number of imprisoned journalists in the world—and an estimated 80 journalists fled Iran to avoid persecution by the regime.<sup>3</sup>

Iranian journalists who leave Iran often continue to work abroad as reporters for a growing number of international Farsi-language satellite broadcasters—such as BBC Persian TV, Radio Free Europe/Radio Farda, Voice of America/Persian News Network—and online news portals established by exiled opposition and independent journalists.<sup>4</sup> With domestic media constrained by heavy state censorship, Iranian journalists working at international Farsi-language media outlets have become key conduits of alternative news and information on Iranian affairs—not only for the Iranian diaspora but for Iranians inside Iran as well—and have helped fuel the growth of a transnational information network connecting Iranians across the globe.

This network has been largely driven by the rise of internet and satellite technologies, which are reshaping modes of communication and the flows of information both inside and outside Iran. For Iranian authorities, the increasing supply of international Farsi-language online and satellite-based media in recent years has posed significant challenges and threats to the state's internal monopoly over information and communications. The state has responded by intensifying its efforts to control the domestic public's access to global communication networks, using both regulatory and technological means—throttling internet speeds,<sup>5</sup> filtering and blocking websites, jamming foreign broadcasts.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Statistics on the size of the Iranian diaspora vary widely. For information on more recent wave of immigration in and after 2009, see *Asylum Levels and Trends in Industrialized Countries, 2011*, United Nations High Commission for Refugees, at: <http://www.unhcr.org/4e9beaa19.html>.

<sup>2</sup> In 2010, 147 journalists were arrested and 43 were convicted, according to Human Rights House of Iran. Saminejad M. (2011) "Media and Internet under Control and Censorship," in Danesh T, Ansari N (eds) *Iran Human Rights Review: Access to Information*. Foreign Policy Centre. Available at: <http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/1369.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Reporters Without Borders (2010). Iran is the "largest prison for journalists," see <http://cpj.org/reports/2011/12/journalist-imprisonments-jump-worldwide-and-iran-i.php#more>.

<sup>4</sup> Popular Iranian diaspora online news portals include Rooz Online ([roozonline.com](http://roozonline.com)), Mardomak ([www.Mardomak.org](http://www.Mardomak.org)), and Khodnevis ([khodnevis.org](http://khodnevis.org)).

<sup>5</sup> Collin Anderson, "Dimming the Internet: Detecting Throttling as a Mechanism of Censorship in Iran," arXiv, June 2013, <http://arxiv.org/abs/1306.4361>.

<sup>6</sup> "Satellite jamming in Iran: A War Over Airwaves," *Small Media*, November 2012, <http://www-tc.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/SatelliteJammingInIranSmallMedia.pdf>.

**Iranians have become increasingly sophisticated news consumers, often triangulating information from various sources and outlets, including state and non-state media.**

<sup>7</sup> Internet World Statistics, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> "Finding a Way: How Iranians Reach for News and Information," Iran Media Program (2011-2012), [http://iranmediaresearch.org/sites/default/files/research/pdf/1340899786/944/finding\\_a\\_way.pdf.pdf](http://iranmediaresearch.org/sites/default/files/research/pdf/1340899786/944/finding_a_way.pdf.pdf); Magdalena Wojcieszak and Briar Smith, "Will politics be tweeted? New media use by Iranian youth in 2011," *New Media & Society*, March 2013; "Internet Censorship in Iran: An Infographic," Iran Media Program (2013), <http://www.iranmediaresearch.org/en/research/pdf/1296>.

<sup>9</sup> More than 42 percent of Iranians watch three hours of illegal satellite TV daily, according to an April 2013 report by Iran's state broadcaster, IRIB. See: "Over 40% of Iranians watch illegal TV channels," *Agence France Presse (AFP)*, August 28, 2013, <http://goo.gl/fo3N6D>.

<sup>10</sup> "Satellite jamming in Iran: A War Over Airwaves," *Small Media*, November 2012, <http://www-tc.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/SatelliteJammingInIranSmallMedia.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Oliver Luft, "Iran elections: BBC World Service battles satellite interference," *The Guardian*, June 19, 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2009/jun/19/iran-bbc-worldwide>.

<sup>12</sup> "Finding a Way: How Iranians Reach for News and Information," Iran Media Program (2011-2012), [http://iranmediaresearch.org/sites/default/files/research/pdf/1340899786/944/finding\\_a\\_way.pdf.pdf](http://iranmediaresearch.org/sites/default/files/research/pdf/1340899786/944/finding_a_way.pdf.pdf); Wojcieszak, M. and Briar Smith, "Will politics be tweeted? New media use by Iranian youth in 2011," *New Media & Society*, March 2013.

Yet these efforts have coincided with the remarkable growth of internet and satellite TV use in Iran. More than half of Iran's 78 million citizens are regular internet users—up from 3 million in 2001<sup>7</sup>—and Iran's young, tech-savvy majority regularly use circumvention tools to access banned and filtered websites.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, although owning a satellite dish is illegal in Iran, satellite TV is increasingly popular among domestic audiences,<sup>9</sup> with at least 50 Farsi-language satellite news and entertainment channels broadcast into Iran from abroad.<sup>10</sup> As a result, Iran's heavily censored state TV (IRIB)—the sole domestic broadcaster in Iran—has been forced to compete with international Farsi-language satellite news channels, like BBC Persian, which often offer counter-narratives to official news broadcasts, critical coverage of government policies, as well as wider coverage of topics and issues that are considered politically and culturally sensitive in the domestic media.

During the political unrest following the 2009 election, international Farsi-language media played a pivotal role in channeling news and information between domestic and international public, prompting increased efforts by authorities to thwart public access to these media.<sup>11</sup> In the post-2009 context, these outlets became targets of persistent filtering and jamming by Iranian authorities, and labeled as conspirators in an international propaganda "soft war" being waged by western powers against Iran.

The influx of external streams of news and information into Iran highlights the complexity of the Iranian media environment, where online and satellite TV has reconfigured patterns of media consumption among domestic audiences. As is often the case with publics in countries in which the state seeks to control both internal and external sources of news and information, Iranians have become increasingly sophisticated news consumers, often triangulating information from various sources and outlets, including state media and non-state media.<sup>12</sup>

While a significant amount of international attention has been given to the declining conditions for journalists in Iran, we know little about the community of Iranian journalists living and working outside the country's borders. Given the central role these journalists play in contributing to what has become a broader, transnational Iranian news cycle, it is therefore important to better understand the perspectives and motivations of Iranian journalists working abroad.

*This study complements our recently published survey of Iranian journalists inside Iran, which examined the working practices and perceptions of domestic journalists. See, “Facing Boundaries, Finding Freedom: An In-Depth Report on Iranian Journalists Working in Iran,” at: <http://www.iranmediaresearch.org/en/research/download/1444>.*

<sup>13</sup> See interview with Thomas Erdbrink, The New York Times correspondent in Tehran, in “Reaching Out to the West, Iran’s Leader Wins Support At Home,” NPR Morning Edition, September 28, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2013/09/27/226716508/reaching-out-to-the-west-irans-leader-wins-support-at-home>.

For this report, the Iran Media Program conducted a survey of Iranian journalists living and working outside Iran. Our aim was to examine more closely the role and relationship between Iranian reporters abroad and their international and domestic audiences, as well as to broaden our knowledge of the Iranian diaspora media culture.

Specifically, our survey addresses the following questions:

- *How do Iranian journalists working outside Iran perceive and communicate with their audiences?*
- *What do these journalists think are the most important sources of news and information among Iranians inside Iran?*
- *How do these journalists perceive their roles as reporters working outside Iran: do they believe their role is to act as activists in support of civil society or to provide independent coverage of Iran?*
- *To what extent do journalists working outside Iran feel free to cover Iran-related topics without fearing for their own safety or the safety of their families?*
- *Are these journalists satisfied with their jobs? What are the main advantages and disadvantages of working as a journalist abroad?*

With this report, we hope to contribute new insights regarding the transnational dimensions of Iranian journalism, as well as how Iranian journalists working outside Iran view their roles within and perspectives on the broader Iranian media ecosystem.

Our research adds to a growing body of knowledge regarding the dynamics of Iran’s domestic media environment and news-consuming public.<sup>13</sup> While state media are indeed heavily censored in Iran—and journalists often face periodic crackdowns and waves of state pressure—the Iranian media landscape is at the same time vibrant, robust, and complex. Iranians are a highly informed, highly connected public—despite state efforts constrain access to certain information—and are increasingly adept at drawing news from a diverse collage of domestic and international sources and platforms.



## Summary of Key Findings

<sup>14</sup>The survey was administered in Farsi.

<sup>15</sup>Both purposive and snowball sampling are non-probability sampling techniques used among populations that are not easily available for recruitment. The sample was purposive, in that the respondents were selected from among online groups set up for Iranian journalistic diaspora, and thus respondents were selected based on some specific criteria they met and characteristics they share. The sample was purposive in that our Iranian network was contacted to disseminate the link to the online survey among their potential contacts who were journalists living and working outside Iran, and who then shared the survey with their acquaintances. See Schutt, R. (2012). *Investigating the Social World: The Process and Practice of Research* (7th ed.). London: Sage.

**Our research indicates that Iranian journalists living and working abroad remain deeply connected to both the Iranian public and the broader Farsi-speaking diaspora, and believe their most important role is to inform both “publics” about issues not covered in the Iranian domestic news.**

**Our findings are based on responses to an online questionnaire completed by 69 Iranian journalists living and working outside Iran.<sup>14</sup> A majority of respondents surveyed left Iran after 2005 and work as journalists for online media outlets.**

The link to the online questionnaire was distributed using purposive and snowball sampling methods,<sup>15</sup> relying on existing online groups and networks of Iranian journalists working abroad, including the International Federation of Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, NewsBaan.com, IJNET, a networking and news portal for Iranian journalists, and a private Facebook page for Iranian journalists.

Because many Iranian journalists working outside Iran may not be part of these online groups, the survey is not likely to represent the entire Iranian journalistic diaspora, especially as older journalists are less likely to encounter and access the survey online.

The survey addressed the following four primary areas of inquiry:

- **Target Audience/Story Coverage:** the main target audiences for Iranian journalists working outside Iran, including the primary topics they cover, as well as perceptions of news consumption habits among Iranians inside in Iran;
- **Institutional roles of journalists and professional practices and ethics:** how Iranian journalists perceive their roles and functions in society;
- **Operating environment:** perceptions of the levels of editorial freedoms of working as a journalists outside Iran, including issues of their personal safety and the safety of their families in Iran, levels of job satisfaction, as well as the advantages and challenges of being a journalist outside in Iran.

Our research indicates that Iranian journalists living and working abroad remain deeply connected to both the Iranian public and the broader Farsi-speaking diaspora, and believe their most important role is to inform both “publics” about issues not covered in the Iranian domestic news. As such, a majority of respondents surveyed are primarily employed with Farsi-language media outlets, covering Iranian current events and politics, as well as “red-line” topics that journalists inside Iran are forbidden to cover.

*While there was a strong consensus among respondents that they have far more editorial freedom than journalists working inside Iran, a majority also said they do not feel completely free to report on Iran-related topics without fearing for their own safety or that of their families.*

However—and importantly—our findings show that a majority of respondents do not believe that their role is to act as activists, contributing to the civil society in Iran, but rather to inform the public with objective, fact-based reporting. Respondents in our survey strongly align themselves with public-interest journalism, in which the media’s primary role is to inform the citizenry and serve as a check on political and economic elites. Iranian reporters in Iran expressed similar beliefs about their role in society, as indicated in our recently published survey of the working practices and perceptions of domestic journalists.<sup>16</sup>

Our findings also reveal key insights about the levels of freedoms—both editorial and personal—that Iranian reporters working outside Iran feel they are able to exercise. While there was a strong consensus among respondents that they have far more editorial freedom than journalists working inside Iran, a majority also said they do not feel completely free to report on Iran-related topics without fearing for their own safety or that of their families. Most respondents also believe they have been the target of a cyber-attack by the Iranian government or its supporters—which coincides with recent reports of such activities against Iranian reporters working at western news outlets.<sup>17</sup>

Overall, respondents surveyed expressed extremely high levels of job satisfaction. A majority reported that the most important benefit of working as a journalist outside Iran is – broadly – increased levels of “freedom,” which was articulated in a multitude of ways, including: the absence of censorship and self-censorship, the ability to research and publish news stories, the ability to investigate and criticize the Iranian government, and ability to access international news and information.

In contrast, a majority of respondents reported that the lack of access to Iranian society, including the challenges of interviewing and communicating with sources inside Iran, as main disadvantages of working as a journalist abroad. In addition, a substantial percentage also expressed concerns over their ability to produce objective news stories on Iran, citing pressures from anti-regime opponents as well as an overall lack of independent news coverage on Iran.

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<sup>16</sup> “Facing Boundaries, Finding Freedom: An In-Depth Report on Iranian Journalists Working in Iran,” Iran Media Program (2013), <http://iranmediaresearch.org/en/research/download/1444>.

<sup>17</sup> See the reports by Committee to Protect Journalists, (<http://www.cpj.org/2013/06/iranian-authorities-target-internet-media-before-e.php>); Iran Human Rights Organization ([http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/06/iran\\_election/](http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/06/iran_election/)); Reporters Without Borders (<http://en.rsf.org/iran-exile-journalists-threatened-03-10-2013,45279.html>).

## Satellite TV is the most important news source for Iranians, followed by the internet, and then state TV.

Not surprisingly, our findings also reveal that Iranian journalists working abroad rely heavily on new media platforms—especially international and domestic news websites—for newsgathering and reporting, as well as for publishing their stories. This trend demonstrates the unique challenges, and limitations, this group faces with regard to conducting original reporting and communicating freely and directly with sources inside Iran.

In addition, our research contributes interesting new survey data regarding perceived patterns of news consumption among the Iranian domestic public.<sup>18</sup> We asked respondents to name what they believe are the most important sources of political news and information for Iranians in Iran. According to respondents, satellite TV is the most important news source for Iranians, followed by the internet, and then state TV.

These responses support recent documentation showing the growing popularity of both satellite TV and internet as key news sources for Iranians<sup>19</sup>—despite that satellite TV is illegal in Iran and that the internet is often throttled, filtered or blocked.<sup>20</sup> Although rising usage of illegal satellite TV in Iran has been a widely known trend,<sup>21</sup> its popularity is typically underrepresented in surveys due to the fact that owning a satellite dish is banned in Iran. For instance, in the Iran Media Program’s previous survey on media consumption among Iranians, only 9% of respondents reported accessing BBC Persian.<sup>22</sup> Yet new studies verify the growing prevalence of satellite TV consumption in Iran,<sup>23</sup> along with increases in viewership of Farsi-language international satellite channels, like BBC Persian TV, among domestic audiences.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> “Finding a Way: How Iranians Reach for News and Information,” Iran Media Program (2011-2012), [http://iranmediaresearch.org/sites/default/files/research/pdf/1340899786/944/finding\\_a\\_way.pdf](http://iranmediaresearch.org/sites/default/files/research/pdf/1340899786/944/finding_a_way.pdf). pdf “Iran Media Use 2012,” BBG Research Series (June 2012), <http://www.bbg.gov/blog/2012/06/12/bbg-data-show-iran-internet-satellite-usage-at-all-time-high/>.

<sup>19</sup> Wojcieszak, M. and Briar Smith, “Will politics be tweeted? New media use by Iranian youth in 2011,” *New Media & Society*, March 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Anderson, C., “Dimming the Internet: Detecting Throttling as a Mechanism of Censorship in Iran,” *arXiv*, June 2013, <http://arxiv.org/abs/1306.4361>.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Sonne and Farnaz Fassih, “In Skies Over Iran, a Battle for Control of Satellite TV,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 27, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203501304577088380199787036.html>.

<sup>22</sup> “Finding a Way: How Iranians Reach for News and Information,” Iran Media Program (2011-2012), [http://iranmediaresearch.org/sites/default/files/research/pdf/1340899786/944/finding\\_a\\_way.pdf](http://iranmediaresearch.org/sites/default/files/research/pdf/1340899786/944/finding_a_way.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> An April 2013 study by Iran’s state TV (IRIB) estimates that 42% of Iranians spend approximately three hours a day watching TV channels that are accessible only by illegal satellite dishes, see: <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=60953>.

<sup>24</sup> “BBC Persian audiences nearly double in Iran despite continued censorship,” BBC Media Centre, April 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2013/persian-arabic-audiences-rise.html>.

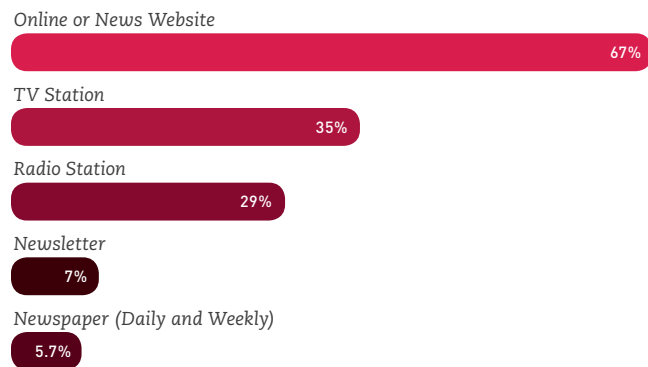
# Survey Sample

The journalists who participated in this survey represent a mix of staff and freelance journalists working at various international news outlets.

Figure 1

## RESPONDENTS WORK ABROAD AS JOURNALISTS FOR THE FOLLOWING TYPES OF MEDIA OUTLETS<sup>25</sup>

Note: Percentages do not add to 100%; Respondents could check more than one response.

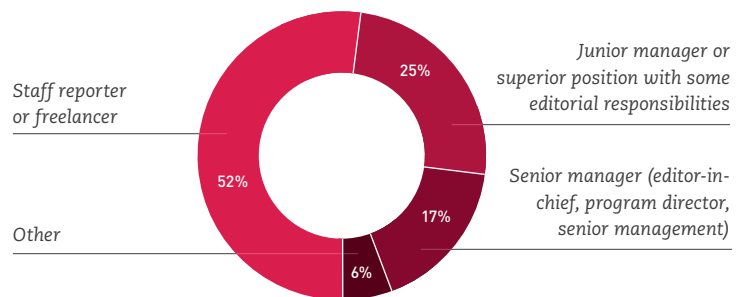


<sup>25</sup> Respondents were asked to check all applicable categories.

Nearly half of respondents are full-time journalists with a contract, 36% work as freelancers on a commission basis, and 12% are part-time journalists with a contract.

Figure 2

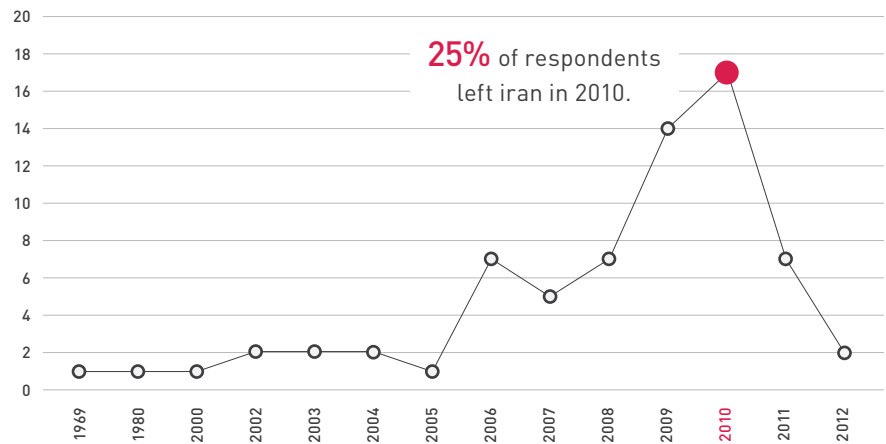
## RESPONDENTS' POSITIONS WITHIN NEWS ORGANIZATIONS



A majority (89 percent) of respondents left Iran after 2005, with a significant percentage having left in or after 2009.

Figure 3

**YEAR RESPONDANTS LEFT IRAN**

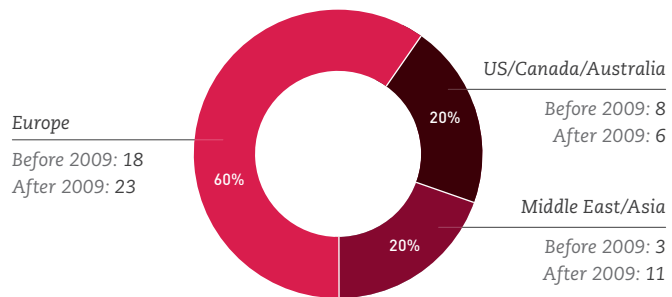


A majority of respondents (60%) currently reside in Europe, while 20% live in the United States, Canada or Australia, and another 20% live in the Middle East or Asia. A majority (41%) of respondents who live in Europe currently reside in the UK.

Figure 4

**RESPONDENTS' CURRENT REGION OF RESIDENCY**

Of the 41 respondents who live in Europe, 17 (41%) of these currently reside in the UK.

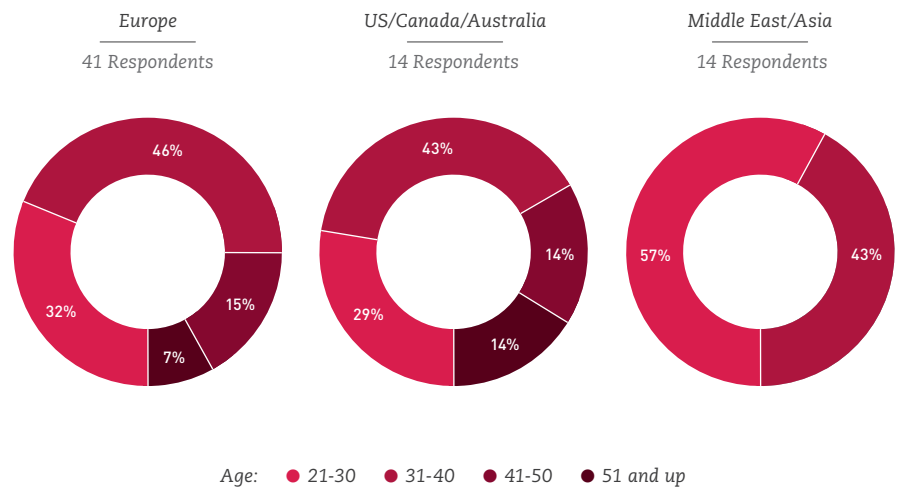


Most respondents (70%) are male. Nearly all respondents (96%) have a university degree, and a majority hold a degree in journalism or communications. Respondents have an average of 13 years of experience working in journalism, ranging from three to 40 years.

A majority of respondents (81%) are younger than age 40. Among those who left in 2009 or after, most are younger than 30, and those who left before 2009 are slightly older (with 48% being between 31 and 40 years of age).

Figure 5

**AGE OF RESPONDENTS ACCORDING TO THE REGION OF RESIDENCE**



# I. Journalists' Orientation: Target Audiences, News Coverage, and Media Consumption

## Key Finding

A majority of respondents report that the domestic Iranian public and international Iranian diaspora are their most important audiences, respectively. Most journalists surveyed cover Iranian politics, societal/civic issues, and foreign affairs. A significantly lower percentage of respondents cover stories for domestic audiences in the countries in which they reside.

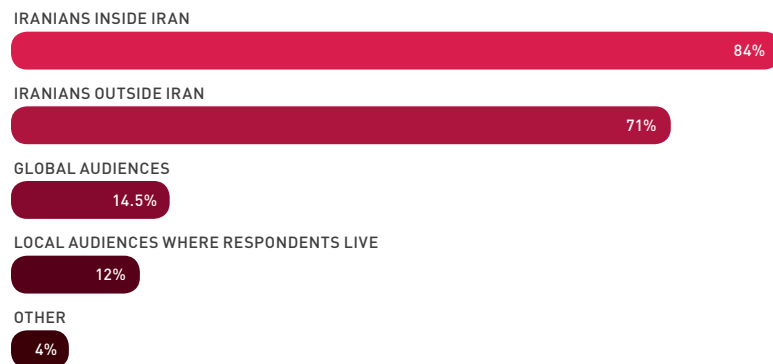
## 1.1 TARGET AUDIENCES AND TYPES OF NEWS COVERAGE

Our first focus was to examine how Iranian journalists living and working outside Iran perceive their roles vis-à-vis their domestic and international publics. Our aim was to better understand how Iranian reporters working outside the country's borders conceptualize and communicate with their audiences, including what topics they typically cover.

Figure 6

### RESPONDENTS' TARGET AUDIENCES

Note: The percentages do not add to 100%, as respondents could check more than one response.



In line with these findings, a majority of respondents (88%) reported publishing primarily in Farsi, with only 7% reporting that they publish in English as their primary language. This was true regardless of when respondents had left Iran.

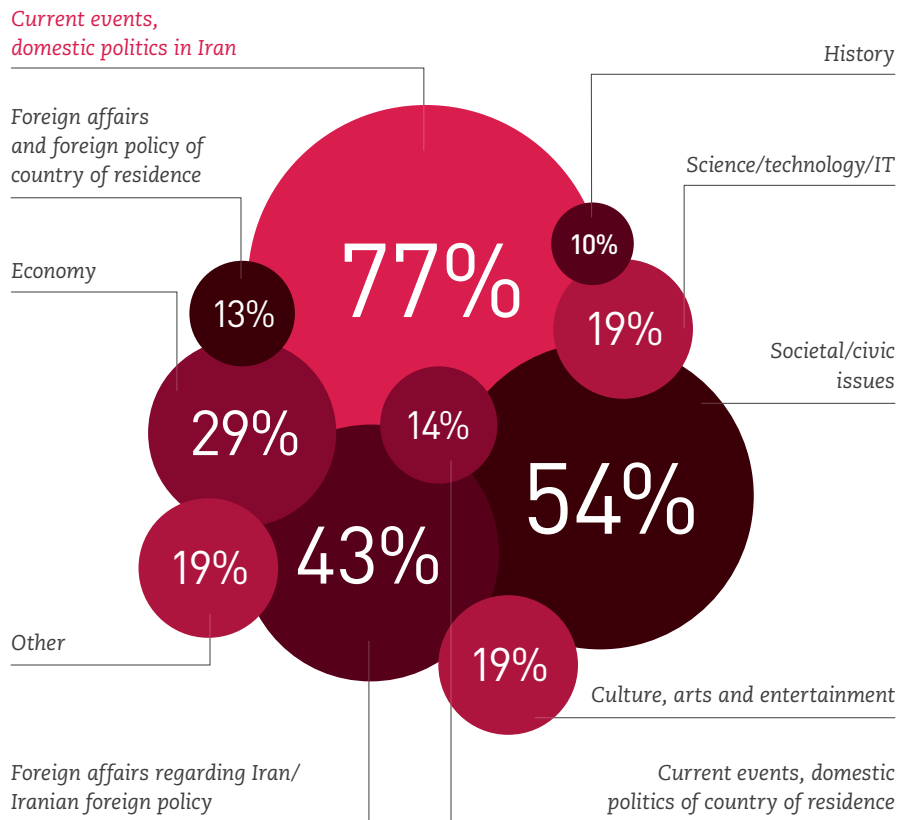
A majority of respondents reported that they most often cover domestic Iranian politics, societal/civic issues, foreign policy, and the economy, respectively.

We also asked respondents to indicate what types of stories they typically cover. A majority of respondents reported that they most often cover domestic Iranian politics, societal/civic issues, foreign policy, and the economy, respectively. A comparatively low percentage of respondents cover stories on politics or current events in the countries in which they now reside. Respondents who chose the open-ended "other" option reported covering political and social activism, women's and human rights issues, as well as issues related to civil society and students' movements.

Figure 7

**TOPICS COVERED BY IRANIAN JOURNALISTS WORKING ABROAD**

Note: The percentages do not add up to 100%, as respondents could check more than one response. Environment (6%), Religion (6%), Health (6%), and Sports (1%) are not shown.





## 1.2 PERCEPTIONS OF NEWS CONSUMPTION IN IRAN

How Iranians in Iran receive and consume news and information is central to understanding the dynamics between Iranian journalists outside Iran and domestic audiences, particularly as the rise of both new media and satellite technologies are transforming the flow of information and communication networks within Iran.

In our survey, we asked Iranian journalists working outside Iran about their perceptions of news consumption habits among Iranians. Specifically, we asked respondents to cite the three most important sources of political news and information for Iranians in Iran.

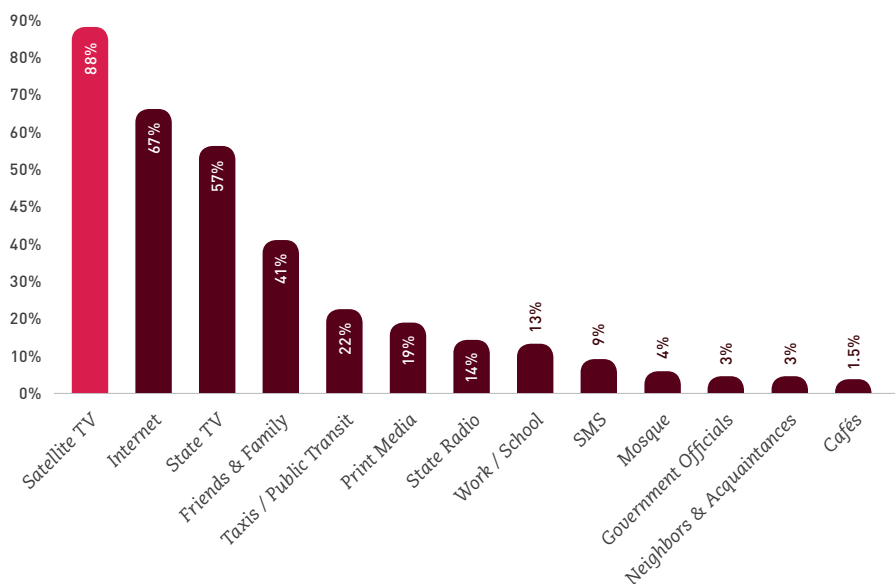
### Key Finding

A solid majority of respondents considered satellite TV to be the most important source of news and information for Iranians, followed by the internet, state TV and friends and family. Respondents also reported that international Farsi-language satellite stations—BBC Persian, Voice of America, and Manoto, respectively—are more important sources of news and information for Iranians in Iran than Iran's state TV (IRIB).

Figure 8

### MOST IMPORTANT NEWS AND INFORMATION SOURCES ABOUT POLITICS AND CURRENT EVENTS FOR IRANIANS INSIDE IRAN

Note: The percentages do not add to 100%, as respondents could check more than one response.



Responses did not vary according to the type of media outlet for which the respondents' worked, or according to any other demographic factors.

*These findings indicate a strong agreement among respondents regarding the popularity of international satellite news channels over state TV among domestic audiences.*

We also asked respondents to name the three TV channels that they thought were most important for Iranians in Iran. **According to our data:**



These findings indicate a strong agreement among respondents regarding the popularity of international satellite news channels over state TV among domestic audiences. Notably, these responses differ significantly from those gathered in our previous survey of media consumption habits among Iranians inside Iran. Respondents in that survey reported that the state broadcaster IRIB was the most important source of news and information, which may indicate reluctance among respondents to reveal their actual consumption of illegal satellite TV. At the same time, it is possible that respondents in this survey—a significant percentage of whom now reside in the UK—may be over-representing the dominance of BBC Persian among other channels.

## II. Institutional Roles of Journalists and Professional Ethics and Standards

### Key Finding

Iranian journalists outside Iran strongly believe in impartial, objective reporting that serves the public interest. A solid majority said that informing the public about significant events is their most important role, followed by providing fact-based news coverage. Most respondents also consider it important to cover topics that are controversial or banned inside Iran. Fewer respondents agreed that journalists should work as activists for civil society; rather, a substantial majority said they believe their role is to provide impartial coverage of news events.

Our survey also sought to examine how Iranian journalists working abroad view their roles and responsibilities with regard to their audiences, as well as to assess, more broadly, their views of professional journalism standards and ethics.

We first asked how Iranian journalists living and working outside Iran view their positions in relation to both the domestic and international audiences. We also queried respondents about the importance they assign to providing objective, impartial news that informs the citizenry—or, in contrast, whether they envision themselves as activists for Iranian civil society and place more value on opinion-based analyses and news coverage in effort to influence domestic and international public opinion.

### RESPONDENTS WERE ASKED TO RATE THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FOLLOWING INSTITUTIONAL ROLES OF JOURNALISM.<sup>26</sup>

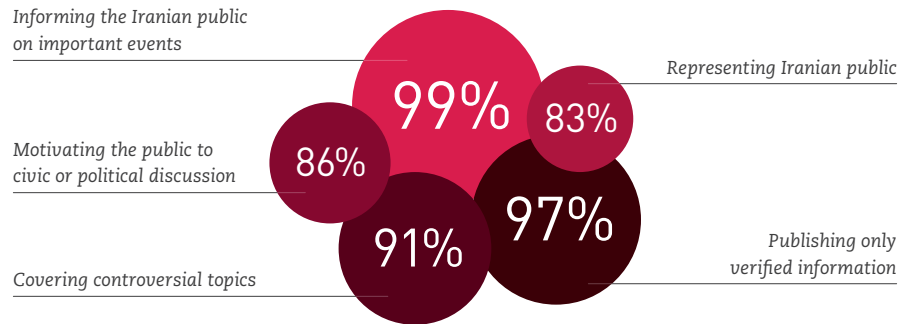
- Informing the Iranian public about events or issues that are important for their daily lives;
- Representing the Iranian public and their grievances against government or authorities;
- Motivating the Iranian public to participate in civic activity and political discussion;
- Covering politically or culturally sensitive or controversial topics that cross so-called “red lines;”
- Publishing stories only when they are substantiated by hard evidence and verifiable information.

<sup>26</sup> These statements were taken primarily from the Worlds of Journalism Study (see e.g. Hanitzsch et al., 2011) were developed in consultation with the network of Iranian scholars and journalists and adapted to the Iranian context. Conceptually, Hanitzsch and colleagues (2011) identify three central areas in which journalism cultures materialize: the perception of journalism’s institutional roles, epistemologies and ethical ideologies. Our questions mostly capture the institutional roles (the first four statements) and epistemologies (e.g., publishing only substantiated stories).

A majority of respondents said that informing the Iranian public about events or issues that are important to their daily lives is their most important role, followed by publishing only fact-based stories, and covering controversial topics, respectively. Encouraging civic participation and representing the public’s grievances against authorities, respectively, were also considered highly important roles, even while ranking as less important than the other three factors.

Figure 9

**RANKING OF MOST IMPORTANT ROLES (“VERY IMPORTANT” AND “IMPORTANT”):**

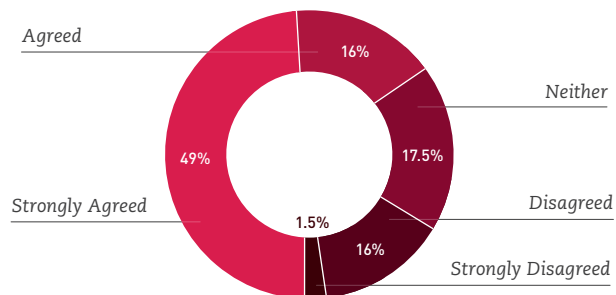


A majority of respondents (65%) strongly agreed or agreed that Iranian journalists outside Iran should act as “impartial journalists” rather than as activists. Only 17.5% said that journalists should play a more activist role.

Finally, we examined whether reporters working abroad see themselves as “activists” working in support of civil society movements in Iran, or whether they believe their role is to act as impartial, objective reporters.

Figure 10

**“IRANIAN JOURNALISTS OUTSIDE IRAN SHOULD BE IMPARTIAL JOURNALISTS RATHER THAN ACTIVISTS CONTRIBUTING TO CIVIL SOCIETY IN IRAN”**



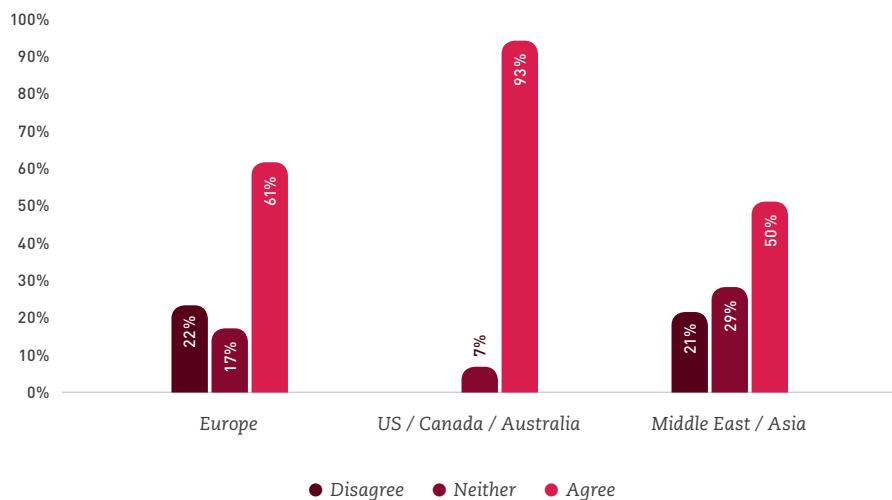
Support for impartial reporting did not depend on when the respondents left Iran, or their age. Nor did it depend on the respondents' education and professional position—for instance, whether respondents majored in journalism or held a more senior position within a news organization—factors which might foster stronger values regarding the importance of objective journalism.

Responses did however vary according to where respondents live. Those in the US, Canada or Australia indicated stronger agreement than those residing elsewhere that international Iranian reporters should produce impartial news coverage rather than act as advocates for civil society.

Figure 11

**PERCENTAGES AGREEING WITH THE STATEMENT THAT IRANIAN JOURNALISTS OUTSIDE IRAN SHOULD BE IMPARTIAL REPORTERS VERSUS SERVE AS ACTIVISTS**

Responses “strongly disagree” and “disagree” as well as “strongly agree” and “agree” are collapsed.



# III. Operating Environment

**Key Finding**

A solid majority of respondents said they operate with greater editorial freedom compared to their domestic counterparts, in terms of their ability to conduct investigative stories about Iranian government or to question the government’s policies. However, most also said they still fear for their own safety as well as the safety of their families. In addition, a majority of respondents believe they have been the target of cyber attacks by the Iranian government or the Cyber Army.

## 3.1 PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL FREEDOMS

Even while living and working abroad, Iranian journalists can still face direct and indirect pressure from domestic authorities.<sup>27</sup> According to reports by human rights groups, many fear retribution against their families in Iran, especially if covering controversial issues related to Iranian politics or that could be deemed critical of government officials or Islam.<sup>28</sup>

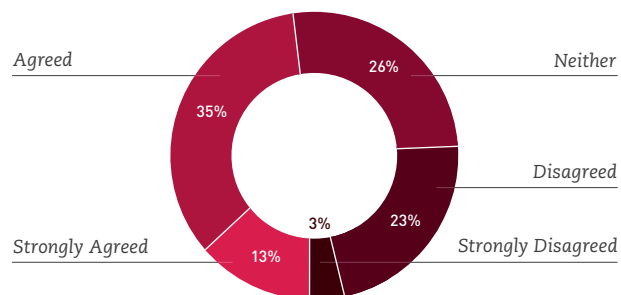
Our survey asked respondents a series of questions about their perceptions of their operating environments and the levels of editorial freedom they feel they are able to exercise. We also asked whether Iranian journalists working outside Iran feared for their safety or the safety of their families, especially if reporting on politically or culturally sensitive or controversial topics.

We first asked respondents how strongly they agree or disagree with a statement that Iranian journalists **living and working outside Iran** can feel free to conduct and publish investigative journalism about the Iranian government without concern for consequences. While there is a general consensus among respondents that Iranian journalists outside Iran have this freedom, respondents also believe there are limitations to these freedoms.

Nearly half of respondents (48%) agreed or strongly agreed that they could pursue investigative stories on Iranian issues without fear of reprisal by authorities, but 26% did not believe that they are free to do so. Notably, only 13% “strongly agreed” with this statement, which indicates a high level of uncertainty among respondents regarding their ability to freely pursue investigative reporting on Iranian-related affairs.

Figure 12

**PERCENTAGES AGREEING WITH THE STATEMENT THAT IRANIAN JOURNALISTS OUTSIDE IRAN CAN PURSUE INVESTIGATIVE STORIES ON IRANIAN ISSUES WITHOUT FEAR OF REPRISAL BY AUTHORITIES**



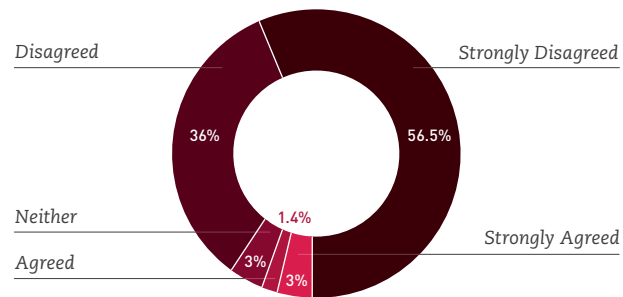
<sup>27</sup> Saeed Kamali Dehghan, “Iran ‘harassing’ relatives of journalists working for BBC Persian Television,” *The Guardian*, October 5, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/oct/05/bbc-persian-television-iranian-staff-relatives>.

<sup>28</sup> Maria Salazar-Ferro and Sheryl Mendez, “Fear, uncertainty stalk Iranian journalists in exile,” *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 2012, <http://cpj.org/2012/02/irans-vast-diaspora.php>.

In contrast, when asked whether Iranian journalists *living and working inside Iran* can feel free to conduct and publish investigative journalism without concern for consequences a vast majority of respondents disagreed that journalists in Iran have this freedom. Specifically, 93% strongly disagreed or disagreed with this statement, while only 4.4% agreed it was possible for domestic journalists to pursue and publish investigative stories without fear of reprisal.

Figure 13

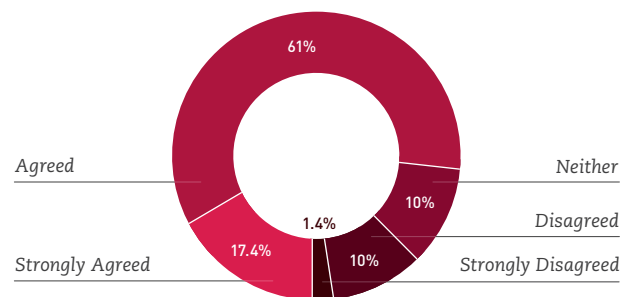
**PERCENTAGES AGREEING WITH THE STATEMENT THAT IRANIAN JOURNALISTS LIVING AND WORKING INSIDE IRAN CAN FEEL FREE TO CONDUCT AND PUBLISH INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM WITHOUT CONCERN FOR CONSEQUENCES**



We also asked respondents to rate the degree to which they agree with the statement: "Iranian journalists *living and working outside Iran* can independently question the activities of the Iranian government." According to our data:

Figure 14

**PERCENTAGES AGREEING WITH THE STATEMENT THAT IRANIAN JOURNALISTS OUTSIDE IRAN CAN QUESTION IRANIAN GOVERNMENT ACTIVITIES**



We then asked whether Iranian journalists *living and working inside Iran* can independently question and investigate the activities of the Iranian government.

Figure 15

**PERCENTAGES AGREEING WITH THE STATEMENT THAT IRANIAN JOURNALISTS INSIDE IRAN CAN QUESTION IRANIAN GOVERNMENT ACTIVITIES**

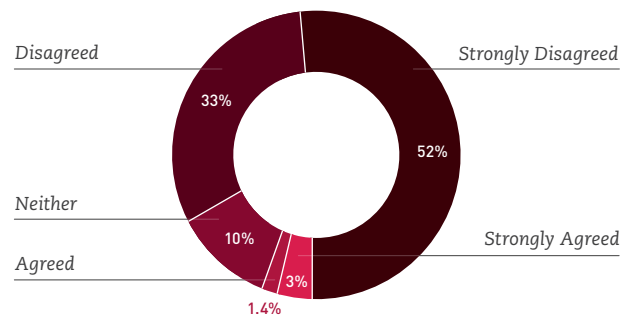
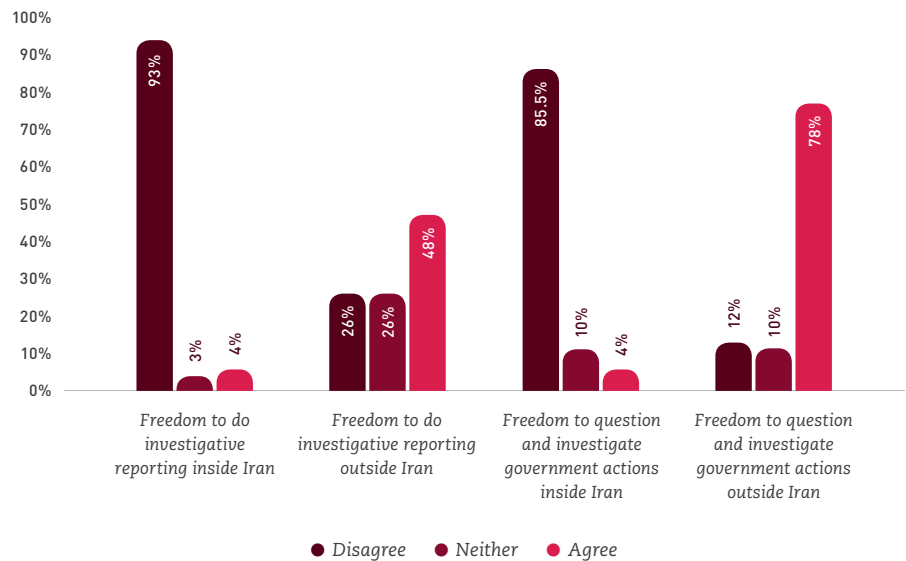


Figure 16

**PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL FREEDOMS**

Responses “strongly disagree” and “disagree” as well as “strongly agree” and “agree” were collapsed.



*Male respondents as well as those who held managerial positions thought that Iranian journalists inside Iran have more freedom to question the government than females and those in non-managerial positions.*

Perceptions of journalistic freedoms did not vary according to whether respondents left Iran before or after 2009, the respondents’ age or the country where they currently reside. However, male respondents as well as those who held managerial positions thought that Iranian journalists inside Iran have more freedom to question the government than females and those in non-managerial positions.



*A substantial portion of respondents (44%) disagreed that they can cover any Iran-related stories without fearing for their own personal safety.*

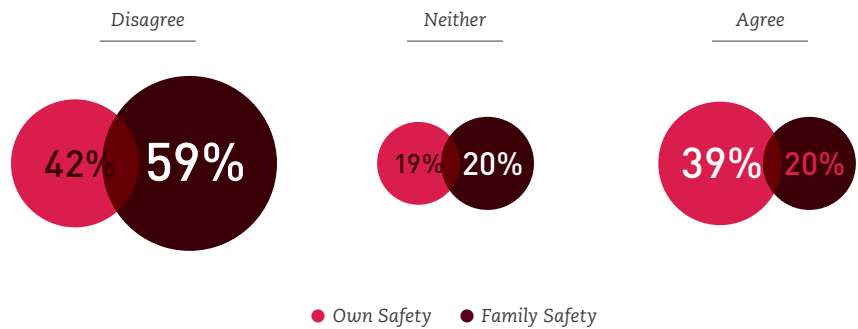
Our survey queried further into these issues by asking the extent to which respondents feel they are free to publish on whatever issues regarding Iran they choose without fearing for their personal safety or the safety of their families.

A substantial portion of respondents (44%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they can cover any Iran-related stories without fearing for their own personal safety. Even more striking, 60% of respondents said that they cannot publish stories on Iran without fearing for the personal safety of their families.

Figure 17

**RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONS “I FEEL FREE TO PUBLISH STORIES ON WHATEVER ISSUES REGARDING IRAN I CHOOSE WITHOUT FEARING ABOUT MY PERSONAL SAFETY,” AND “I FEEL FREE TO PUBLISH STORIES ON WHATEVER ISSUES REGARDING IRAN I CHOOSE WITHOUT FEARING ABOUT THE SAFETY OF MY FAMILY.”**

Responses “strongly disagree” and “disagree” as well as “strongly agree” and “agree” were collapsed.



Notably, those respondents who left Iran after 2009 feared for their own and their families’ safety more than those who left Iran before 2009.

Key Finding

Most respondents said they believe they have been the target of hacking or other cyber threats that they attribute to the Iranian regime, pro-government hackers or the Cyber Army.

Finally, we asked respondents if they believe they had ever been the target of a cyber attack by the Iranian regime or the Cyber Army. According to news reports, high-profile Iranian journalists working for international Persian-language media—especially BBC Persian and the VOA’s Persian News Network—have become targets of cyber attacks, hacking and falsification of their social media accounts.<sup>29</sup>

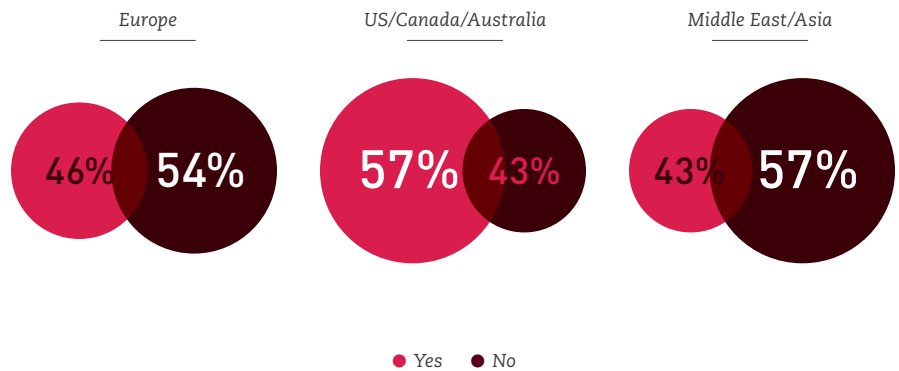
More than half of our respondents (52%) believe they have been the target of hacking or other cyber threats that they attribute to the Iranian regime, pro-government hackers or the Cyber Army.

Journalists who left Iran before 2009 reported being targeted more often (66%) than those who left Iran in or after 2009 (43%).

In addition, those living in Middle East/Asia report to have been targeted in greater proportions than respondents residing in the United States, Canada, or Australia.

Figure 18

PERCENTAGE REPORTING HAVING BEEN A TARGET OF CYBER ATTACK BY THE REGION WHERE RESPONDENTS RESIDE



<sup>29</sup> Kamali Dehghan, S., “Iran ‘harassing’ relatives of journalists working for BBC Persian Television,” *The Guardian*, October 5, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/oct/05/bbc-persian-television-iranian-staff-relatives>.

**Key Finding**

*Job satisfaction was high among respondents – with a solid majority expressing high levels of satisfaction with their occupation. Few respondents reported being dissatisfied with their position.*

### 3.2 JOB SATISFACTION

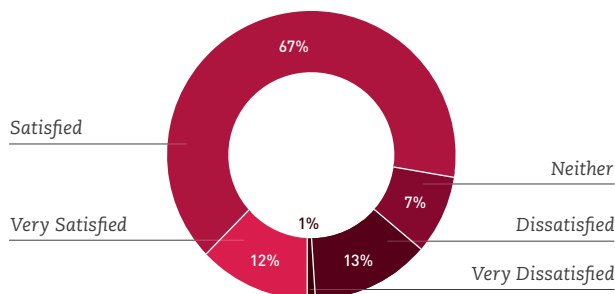
Compared to the press-restrictive conditions in which journalists inside Iran operate, Iranian journalists working abroad likely enjoy greater editorial freedoms than their domestic counterparts.

To assess whether this is the case, we asked about the levels of job satisfaction among Iranian journalists working internationally.

We asked respondents to rate on a scale from 1 to 5 how satisfied (1=very dissatisfied; 5=very satisfied) they are with their jobs as journalists. According to our data, a vast majority (79%) reported being satisfied or very satisfied.

Figure 19

#### JOB SATISFACTION



<sup>30</sup> See Section 3.1, *Perceptions of Editorial Freedoms*, pages 17-21.

Job satisfaction did not vary according to whether respondents left before or after 2009, their level of professional experience, or the respondents' perceptions of the level of editorial freedoms they are able to exercise.<sup>30</sup>

**Key Finding**

Increased levels of freedom in general—including freedom of expression, freedom from censorship, and “freedom to act”—was most often cited as the top advantage, mentioned by nearly two-thirds of all respondents. Access to information was the second-most mentioned benefit of working as a journalist abroad, followed by personal security/safety. Notably, economic/job security was less frequently mentioned as a benefit of working abroad.

<sup>31</sup> Roughly three fourths of the sample (72%) volunteered a response that best fit with one category only, and the rest offered responses that fit with more than one category.

### 3.3 ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF WORKING AS A JOURNALIST OUTSIDE IRAN

Our survey also assessed what respondents perceive as the main advantages and disadvantages of working as a journalist abroad. Respondents were asked to think about their broader profession and not just their job when offering open-ended responses. The answers were recorded verbatim and coded later by independent analysts.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast, the lack of awareness of events and public opinion inside Iran was cited as the biggest disadvantage of living and working abroad as a journalist, followed by the lack of ability to access sources inside Iran. Maintaining journalistic objectivity was also mentioned as a key challenge of working as a journalist abroad, with respondents citing pressure from opposition groups and NGOs, as well as a general lack of independent reporting on Iranian affairs by international media outlets. Only a small percentage of respondents reported that fears of their safety or the safety of their families inside Iran was a disadvantage of working as a journalist abroad.

#### ADVANTAGES:

**1** “Freedom” was the most often mentioned advantage of working as a journalist outside Iran, cited by 61% of respondents. This was articulated in several ways, as indicated below:

- **Working in a more free environment: (19%)**  
Responses included general references to “freedom” or “more freedom” or more specific responses such as working in “a more liberated atmosphere” or having “access to an open atmosphere.”
- **Freedom of expression / freedom to publish (17%)**  
Responses included: “having more of freedom of expression”; “freedom to publish different reports”; “freedom to publish and follow up the news,” among others.
- **Freedom from censorship (16%)**  
Responses included: “being able to write with less censorship or no censorship at all,” “freedom in covering topics which are hard or impossible to write about in Iran,” “not being censored,” or “being freed from the shackles of Iran’s red lines.”
- **Freedom to act (9%)**  
Responses included: “The main benefit is the freedom to act and this includes the freedom to write critical articles,” or “freedom of action.”

**2** **Access to information and sources** was the second most-frequently cited advantage, occurring in 22% of the responses. Respondents mentioned: the “freedom to contact experts and commentators outside Iran,” “freedom and access to Iranian expertise who were eliminated from media inside Iran,” “access to original sources,” “access to information, access to academic establishments to improve our knowledge,” as well as “free access to internet,” among others.

**3** **Increased personal security** was cited in 17% of the responses. Examples included: “not being afraid of being arrested suddenly, with or without any reason,” “relatively more freedom and more security,” and “a more secure place to write about what you think.”

**4** **Professional development/access to professional newsrooms and facilities** occurred in 7.5% of responses. Examples included: “Technical and training facilities for journalists,” “good work facilities,” or “improving skills and journalism knowledge.”

**5** **Working at international level** was cited in 7.5% of the responses. Responses included: the “chance to work at international standards,” “experiencing working at an international level,” and the opportunity to cover “news on Iran at the global level.”

**6** **Journalistic objectivity and independence** were mentioned in 6% of the responses. Examples included: “being professional, being independent,” and “being independent from the government, governmental organizations, semi-governmental organizations, politicians and political parties.”

*The lack of awareness of events and public opinion inside Iran was cited as the biggest disadvantage of living and working abroad as a journalist, followed by the lack of ability to access sources inside Iran.*

**7** **Economic security** recurred in roughly 6% of the mentions, including such responses as: “the existence of both job and social security” or “we have less worries about earning a living, and we have more job security.”

**8** **Potential influence on Iran** was cited in 4% of the responses, with respondents mentioning: “a journalist can help to break past censorship in Iran.”

#### DISADVANTAGES:

**1** **Lack of awareness of what’s happening in Iran** was the most frequently mentioned disadvantage, cited by 41% of respondents. Examples included: “being far from Iranian society and public opinion,” “lack of access to events inside Iran causes a misunderstanding about the situation,” and “being physically away from the [Iranian] people and having a lack of both a business and everyday relationship with the community that I continue to work and write for [Iran]”

**2** **Lack of access to sources inside Iran** was cited in 34% of the responses, with respondents mentioning “difficulties [getting] interviews with sources inside Iran,” “lack of access to first-hand sources,” doing “second-hand journalism,” “reporting [from] our desk,” and “using internet as a source instead of accessing authorities.”

**3** **Job/financial insecurity issues** were mentioned in about 18% of the responses. Examples included: “Lack of job security,” lack of a “fixed-term job,” “less job opportunities to earn a living.”

**4** **Lack of journalistic objectivity and independence** was cited in 15% of the responses. Examples included: challenges of remaining objective about events in Iran, “public expectations from journalists outside Iran to be political activists, to support certain political groups and oppose the other ones,” and concerns over the lack of independent news on Iran among international media.

**5** **Lack of professionalism** was cited in 10% of the responses, with examples including: not having professional qualifications to work as journalists, lack of professionalism among media organizations that receive foreign funding, and “absence of an atmosphere of professionalism among colleagues,” among others.

**6** **Other** – 9% of responses can be categorized as “other,” and included responses such as: “loneliness,” “different culture, customs and traditions,” and “non-Iranians have no understanding about the conditions in Iran because they have never been there.”

**7** **Concerns about personal safety and the safety of family members** was the least-frequently mentioned disadvantage, cited by only 4.5% of respondents. Examples include: “We have to work cautiously in order to keep our family living in Iran safe,” “pressure exerted on my family from the government influences my work,” and “you have to focus on being professional, while at the same time ensuring that you don’t create problems for your family.”

## Looking Forward

*As our findings show, Iranian journalists are integral participants in the transnational Farsi-language news cycle that serves audiences both inside and outside Iran.*

**Iranian journalists working outside Iran play a vital role in providing news and information to audiences both inside and outside Iran, particularly as Iranian authorities continue efforts to censor and thwart access to external media and information.**

The recent election of a more moderate President Hassan Rouhani has ushered in a wave of optimism about the potential for a more open and permissive domestic media space, as well as the possibility of rapprochement with the West and an easing of economic sanctions, which loom large over the daily lives of Iranians. Yet much of the heavily bureaucratic and byzantine administrative structures regulating cyberspace, state broadcasting, and Iran's press, arts, and culture remain in place.

The conservative faction still wields power and influence, and web filtering and arrests for illegal cultural activities persist. What reforms the new administration brings to the governance of media and communications is unknown—and as Rouhani's term progresses, the implications for media and cultural policy and the continuation of cycles of repression and pressures on Iran's internal information environment remain to be seen.

Evidence of the increasing consumption of international Farsi-language media among domestic audiences demonstrates both the public's growing demand for non-state news and information as well as the state's inability to control the flow of cross-border communications. The accessibility and popularity of these external streams of alternative information have not only generated new patterns of media consumption in Iran but have also significantly diversified the Iranian media landscape, enabling Iranians to access a wide variety of news and information beyond state-controlled news.



As our findings show, Iranian journalists are integral participants in the transnational Farsi-language news cycle that serves audiences both inside and outside Iran. For nearly the last decade, international Farsi-language media have been one of the regime's top concerns, and a central staging ground of the so-called "soft war" between western powers and Iran.<sup>32</sup> Under Rouhani's presidency, the websites for BBC Persian and Voice of America/Persian News Network remain inaccessible without the use of circumvention tools, yet CNN and Reuters were recently unblocked, which may indicate a more open posture toward external western news sources.

The recent release of political prisoners and journalists, and the reopening of several previously shuttered papers, are also positive signals of a new era of relaxation toward international Farsi-language media. Whether this results in a decrease in filtering and jamming of these media is a key question, as Iran's unpredictable and dynamic media environment continues to change and unfold.

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<sup>32</sup> Farzan Sabet, "Soft War': A new episode in the old conflict between Iran and the United States," Iran Media Program 2013, <http://www.iranmediaresearch.org/en/research/download/1520>.

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