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Facing Boundaries, Finding Freedom: An In-Depth Report on Iranian Journalists Working in Iran

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Facing Boundaries, Finding Freedom: An In-Depth Report on Iranian Journalists Working in Iran

Abstract

Despite extensive documentation of and attention to direct state pressure on journalists and the almost continual reissuing of “red lines” as a pretense for these media-repressive tactics, little systematic research has been done about the field of journalism in Iran. Beyond direct state repression—harassment, arrests, imprisonment—Iranian journalists face a myriad of regulatory and bureaucratic controls that restrict editorial freedom and the flow of information between journalists and citizens. Yet we know little about how reporters in Iran contend with these challenges on an everyday basis, and in particular outside the context of tightened state controls and crackdowns on journalists during political elections. Hence, there is a need to look “beyond the prison cell” and to examine more closely the everyday operating conditions in which Iranian journalists work, as well as their professional ethics and standards, in order to illustrate a fuller picture of the dynamics of Iran’s media culture.

With this report, the Annenberg School for Communication’s Iran Media Program offers—to our knowledge—the first systematic evidence of the working environment of Iranian journalists. It addresses a critical information and research gap regarding the reporting practices of Iranian journalists, their perceptions of editorial freedoms, their ideas of what the media’s role is in society, and the ways in which reporters and editors contend with Internet filtering and censorship. The fundamental aim of this study is to generate a deeper understanding of how Iranian journalists operate both within and despite an environment of heavy state oversight and restrictions, as well as to broaden our perspective of the complexities of media censorship in Iran.

Disciplines

Communication | International and Area Studies

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FACING BOUNDARIES, FINDING FREEDOM:

An In-Depth Report on Iranian Journalists Working in Iran

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Summer 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

Media censorship in Iran has been the focus of much international attention and concern, particularly since the state's crackdown on journalists following the 2009 elections. In the aftermath of the mass protests against Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's 2009 presidential victory, authorities arrested and imprisoned scores of reformist and opposition journalists and bloggers, while closing dozens of opposition media outlets deemed responsible for fueling domestic unrest.¹ These measures put a spotlight on the repressive environment in which Iranian journalists operate, and revealed the intensity of efforts by hardliners in power to thwart reformist ideas and control the diversity and flow of information to Iranian citizens.

Iranian journalists faced another wave of state pressure during the 2013 election, as authorities sought to stifle any criticism of the campaign that might spark political dissent and protest. Months ahead of the June election, more than a dozen opposition journalists were arrested and numerous pro-reform print and online publications were either banned or blocked.² Authorities also tightened controls over online media—throttling Internet speeds, and filtering and blocking social media sites and domestic and international news portals—an effort that significantly hindered access to online information and communications and weakened the role of online media as an effective campaign platform for candidates.

Given the restricted access to online media, Iran's print press played a more prominent role throughout the 2013 campaign. Although Iran's state-run broadcast media—which is managed by pro-regime loyalists—is the dominant source of news for Iranians,³ and the only media that hosts presidential debates, the country's print media culture is remarkably prolific, offering a range of information and opinions from across Iran's political spectrum.⁴ Iran's print press has traditionally served as not only important campaign tools for candidates—both reformists and conservatives—but also as key resources for more diverse election news, debates and analyses for Iranian citizens.

While the print media generally operate with far greater editorial freedom than Iran's heavily controlled state broadcaster, Iran's print journalists came under intense government scrutiny and monitoring during the 2013 election season. Along with receiving direct pressure from security

¹In 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>.

²According to a report by Iran Human Rights organization, 18 journalists were arrested in the first two months of 2013 (http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/03/javad_rooh). According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, as of May 2013, Iranian authorities were holding at least 40 journalists in prison before the June presidential election, the second-highest number of imprisoned journalists in the world, (see: <http://www.cpj.org/reports/2013/05/as-election-nears-irans-journalists-are-in-chains.php>).

³"Finding a way - How Iranians reach for news and information," *Iran Media Program*, Annenberg School of Communication, <http://www.iranmediaresearch.org/en/research/pdf/990>.

⁴"The Political Affiliations of Iranian Newspapers: A comparative look at the 2009 and 2013 elections" *Iran Media Program*, Annenberg School of Communication, <http://www.iranmediaresearch.org/en/blog/227/13/05/22/1384>.

Beyond direct state repression—harassment, arrests, imprisonment—Iranian journalists face a myriad of regulatory and bureaucratic controls that restrict editorial freedom and the flow of information between journalists and citizens.

forces to support pro-regime candidates, editors and journalists were also warned by intelligence officials against covering banned topics that crossed “red lines” or that criticized the electoral process or outcome.

The state’s heightened censorship of Iranian media during the 2013 campaign extended beyond opposition media to include conservative print and online outlets as well, reflecting the political divide within Iran’s conservative camp between former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Supreme Leader. Leading into the 2013 presidential election, numerous conservative websites, blogs and news portals aligned with Ahmadinejad were blocked or filtered by judicial authorities loyal to the Supreme Leader—a move that drew heavy criticism from Iran’s official and conservative media outlets.⁵

While crackdowns on the media around election campaigns are not uncommon in Iran, the constraints placed on both reformist and conservative news outlets during the 2013 election demonstrates the unpredictability of the regime’s approach to both censoring and punishing media and journalists.

Despite extensive documentation of and attention to direct state pressure on journalists—and the almost continual reissuing of “red lines” as a pretense for these media-repressive tactics—little systematic research has been done about the field of journalism in Iran. Beyond direct state repression—harassment, arrests, imprisonment—Iranian journalists face a myriad of regulatory and bureaucratic controls that restrict editorial freedom and the flow of information between journalists and citizens. Yet we know little about how reporters in Iran contend with these challenges on an everyday basis—and in particular outside the context of tightened state controls and crackdowns on journalists during political elections. Hence, there is a need to look “beyond the prison cell” and to examine more closely the everyday operating conditions in which Iranian journalists work, as well as their professional ethics and standards, in order to illustrate a fuller picture of the dynamics of Iran’s media culture.

With this report, the Annenberg School for Communication’s Iran Media Program offers—to our knowledge—the first systematic evidence of the working environment of Iranian journalists. It addresses a critical information and research gap regarding the reporting practices of Iranian journalists, their perceptions of editorial freedoms, their ideas of what the media’s role is in society, and the ways in which reporters and editors contend with Internet filtering and censorship.

⁵ Golnaz Esfandiari, “Even Iran’s Conservative Media Complain Of Filtering,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 11, 2013, www.rferl.org/content/iran-internet-filtering-election-media/25013289.html.

The fundamental aim of this study is to generate a deeper understanding of how Iranian journalists operate—both within and despite an environment of heavy state oversight and restrictions—as well as to broaden our perspective of the complexities of media censorship in Iran.

Specifically, our survey sought to address the following questions:

- *How do Iranian journalists perceive the levels of editorial freedom, their job satisfaction, and the advantages and challenges of their profession?*
- *How do Iranian journalists regard their roles as reporters, in terms of their obligations to the public, their ideas of the role of media in society, and professional practices and ethics?*
- *What sources do Iranian journalists rely on for newsgathering and reporting?*
- *What is the role of new media platforms for news production and circulation?*
- *How do reporters deal with online censorship and what attempts do they make to circumvent Web filtering and blocking?*

⁶ Foreign researchers in particular face serious obstacles conducting field work and communicating freely with reporters inside Iran. The government often impedes such academic research, especially in the social sciences and humanities, which officials regard as a threat to Islamic values. Iranians who cooperate or participate in research initiatives with foreign academic institutions on certain sensitive topics could also face reprisals and disciplinary action.

⁷ US scholars often recruit journalists from listings provided by media monitoring organizations, such as the Editor & Publisher International Yearbook, Cision MediaSource, and the News Media Yellow Book database (see: <https://www.leadershipdirectories.com/Products/LeadershipPrintDirectories/Media/NewsMediaYellowBook>). These sources provide specific contacts for media outlets and names of reporters within these outlets, (see: The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism annual studies, <http://www.journalism.org>). In Iran no such comprehensive listings exist.

This study is based on a field survey of Iranian journalists working inside Iran—a process which poses a unique set of challenges, particularly in terms of access and data collection.⁶ For instance, the dominance of pro-regime media outlets within broadcast media often means these journalists are the most accessible to researchers, making it harder to obtain more diverse perspectives from reformist or opposition journalists and bloggers.⁷ In addition, the nature of this study was particularly sensitive, given the complex relationship between the media and the Iranian regime.

Despite these challenges, our survey offers important new insights regarding the working practices and routines of Iranian journalists. It also details their ideas about censorship and editorial freedoms, professional practices and ethics, the role of media in society, and how journalists contend with online censorship.

Summary of Key Findings

Our survey shows there are little differences between Iranian journalists working for state-run and independent media outlets on a wide range of tested factors, including their perceptions of editorial freedoms, levels of job satisfaction, and the role of the media in society.

Our findings are based on responses from a systematically recruited sample of 304 Iranian journalists working inside Iran, selected from both state-run and independent media outlets. The sample also included a mix of staff, part-time and freelance journalists—from senior editors to general-assignment reporters—across a range of media sectors (print, radio, and tv) and outlets (see Sample details, demographics and selection methodology, [page 5](#)).

The survey addressed the following four primary areas of inquiry:

- *Operating environment for Iranian journalists, including perceptions of the levels of editorial freedom, job satisfaction, as well as the advantages and challenges of being a journalist in Iran;*
- *Institutional roles of journalists and professional practices and ethics: how Iranian journalists perceive their roles and functions in society, as well as their approaches to newsgathering;*
- *Sources for newsgathering and reporting, including the role of new media platforms;*
- *Online censorship and the use of circumvention tools to access filtered and blocked web content.*

Our findings both corroborate and challenge existing notions and assumptions about the environment in which Iranian journalists operate, given the well-documented constraints on media freedom in Iran. Broadly, our findings verify that Iranian journalists operate within a media-restrictive environment with limited editorial freedom—especially with regard to conducting investigative reporting or covering topics that could be deemed critical of the state, government officials, or Islam. Nevertheless, Iranian journalists strongly endorse the idea of public-interest journalism and believe that serving and representing the public against the government is among their most important roles.

Among the most significant of our findings, our survey shows there are little differences between Iranian journalists working for state-run and independent media outlets on a wide range of tested factors, including their perceptions of editorial freedoms, levels of job satisfaction, and the role of the media in society. Notably, our findings show that state journalists are more likely to use circumvention tools to access filtered or blocked web content than those who work for independent outlets.

Survey Sample

The media organizations we sampled represent both news and entertainment media, national and local media as well as state-owned and privately owned media outlets. Journalists were selected in proportion to the size of the outlet’s editorial staff, with between one and three journalists selected from each organization.

Figure 1

INTERVIEWS WERE CONDUCTED IN THE MAJOR CITIES IN IRAN, WHERE MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS ARE LOCATED

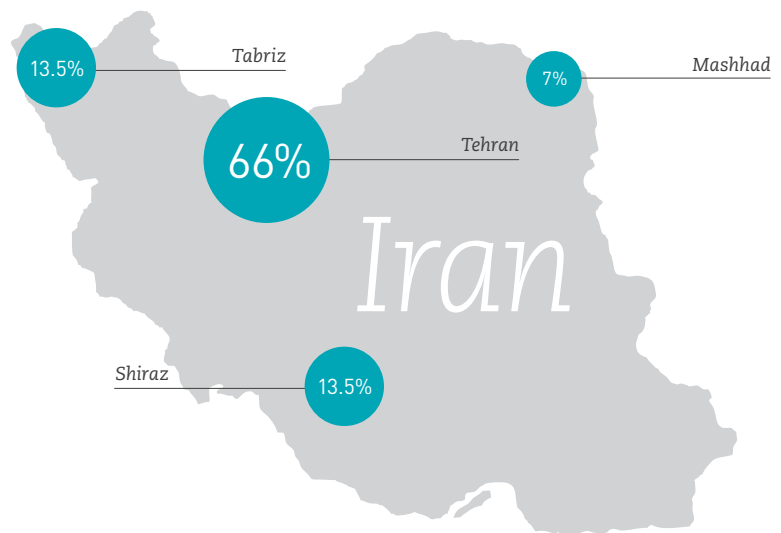
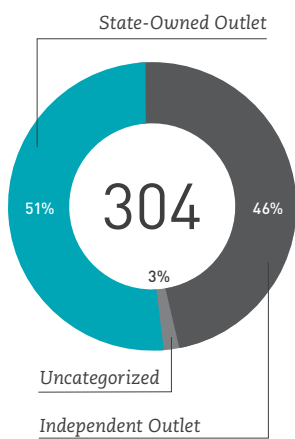


Figure 2



A total of 304 journalists completed the survey,⁸ and depending on the outlet where the journalists worked, the organization was coded as either state-run or independent.⁹ *Slightly more than half (51%) of the respondents worked for a state-owned outlet, and 46% worked for an independent news organization.* Most respondents were full-time staff journalists (48%), followed by freelance journalists (32%), and part-time staff journalists (10%).

⁸The surveys were conducted in the field at the beginning of 2012 with a subcontracted research firm. The final response rate was 30%.

⁹The coding was verified by two independent coders who are experts on Iranian media and part of the Iran Media Program network. We were unable to categorize 3% of the outlets.

Figure 3

RESPONDENTS WORKED AT THE FOLLOWING TYPES OF MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS

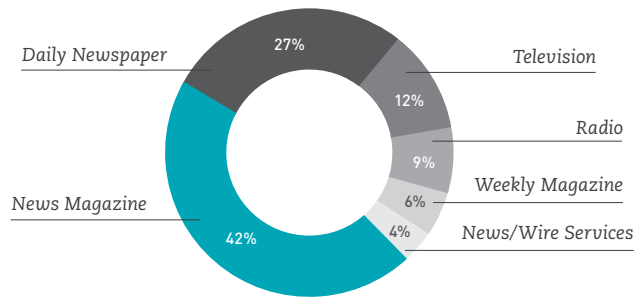
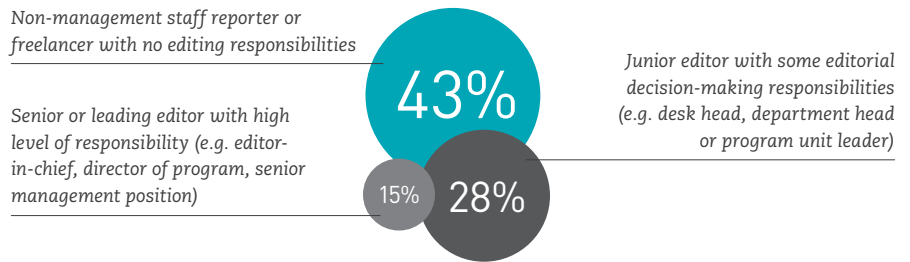


Figure 4

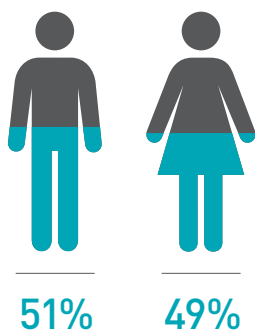
RESPONDENTS' POSITIONS WITHIN MEDIA OUTLETS



The average experience working as a professional journalist was about seven years.

Respondents were nearly evenly split with regard to gender (51% male, 49% female). However males were dominant in managerial positions.

Figure 5



Most respondents held an undergraduate degree (65%), 14% had a graduate-level master's degree, 16% reported having graduated high school, and 3% had a PhD degree. Of those who had some university education, a majority (59%) specialized in journalism, communications or a related field, and nearly all (98%) received their education in Iran.

Additional details on the sampling process and the sample frame are presented in the Appendix (see page 25).

I. Operating Environment

Although press freedom is formally guaranteed in the Iranian Constitution, media in Iran are bound by a myriad of additional laws and decrees that contain strict content regulations prohibiting news outlets and journalists from publishing a broad range of materials, including content deemed to be anti-Islamic or critical of the Supreme Leader and other government officials.¹⁰

In addition to sector-specific content regulations,¹¹ all journalists in Iran are subject to criminal provisions in the Islamic Penal Code of Iran which prohibit the publication of content considered to be a threat to national security, Islamic values, or that violates public morals.¹² The Penal Code also contains criminal sanctions against libel and defamation, which are generally regarded as press-hostile restrictions that limit the media's ability to perform its "watchdog" role. Violations of sector-specific media regulations or provisions in the Penal Code can be punished with fines, imprisonment, lashings or the death penalty.

Hence, given these restrictions, a keynote of this study was to investigate how Iranian journalists perceive their overall operating environment, including the levels of editorial freedoms they are able to exercise as reporters, their level of job satisfaction, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of being a journalist in Iran.

1.1 PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL FREEDOMS

To assess whether Iranian journalists see their operating media environment as highly restricted, we asked respondents to rate on a scale from 1 to 5 how strongly they agree or disagree with the following statements:

"Iranian journalists can feel free to conduct and publish investigative journalism without concern for consequences."

"Iranian journalists can independently question and investigate the government's activities."

"Iranian journalists can publish pieces that propose alternatives to governmental policies and positions."

¹⁰ Such materials are prohibited by various law and decrees, including the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1979, as amended in 1989), the Press Law, (1986 as amended in 2000), the Law on Computer Crimes (2009), and the Islamic Penal Code of Iran.

¹¹ Print and online newspapers are regulated by the 1986 Press Law, amended in 2000 to include electronic versions of print publications. Iran's state broadcaster (the IRIB) is regulated by the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and by several additional statutes: the IRIB General Policies and Principles, the IRIB Articles of Association, and the IRIB Charter. Blogs and websites are regulated by several laws and decrees, including: "The regulations and conditions of computer information network," approved by the SCRC 12/9/2001, see: <http://goo.gl/sZAwT>; "Regulations for the Organization of Iranian Internet Websites and Blogs," (number 1/14808 and dated 20 August 2006), "Code Organizing Iranian websites," (2007) in Persian: <http://www.samandehi.ir/samHelp/regulation.html>; Law on Computer Crimes (2009), <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/135717>.

¹² Islamic Penal Code of Iran, English translation provided by Iran Human Rights Documentation Center at: <http://goo.gl/p2w5YQ>.

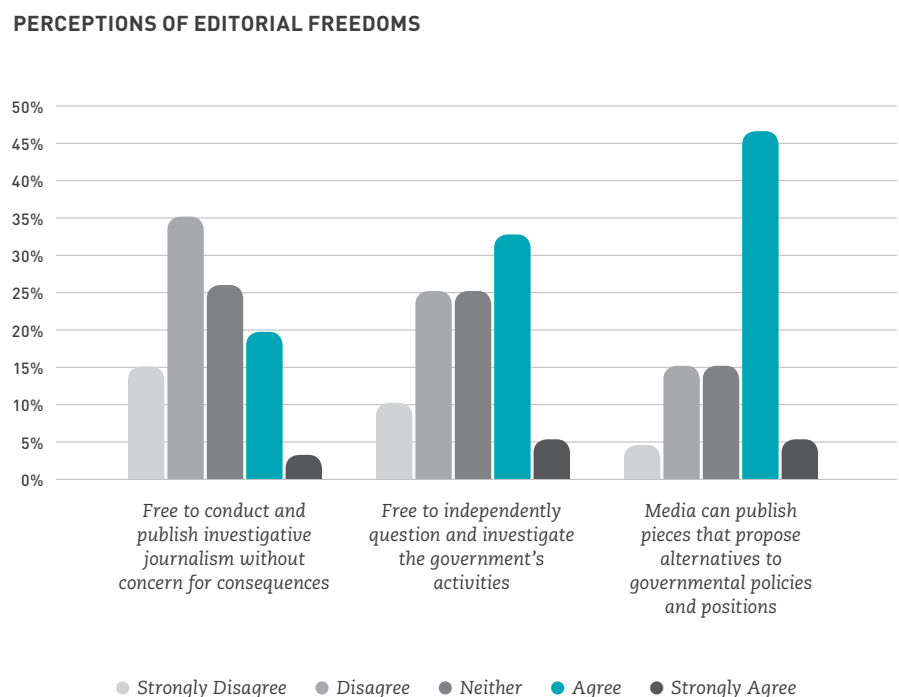
According to our data:

- A majority of respondents said they **did not** believe it was possible for reporters to pursue investigative stories without fear of consequences.
- Respondents were also **pessimistic** about the ability of journalists to **independently question the government** or investigate the government’s activities.
- However, a majority of respondents also reported that the media can publish news stories that **propose alternatives to the government’s policies**.
- Across all three questions, responses generally did not vary according to whether respondents worked at state-run versus independent media outlets.
- There were also no significant differences in how respondents answered according to certain demographic characteristics: gender, education and location.

Key Finding

While Iranian journalists generally do not feel free to conduct investigative journalism or to question the government’s activities, most say that they are able to present alternatives to government policies.

Figure 6



¹³ For example, among the youngest journalists surveyed, those between ages 19 and 25, the mean agreement that Iranian journalists can carry out investigative reporting without fear was 2.56, as compared to a mean of 2.83 for those between ages 40-46, and a mean of 3.07 among respondents 47 years of age or older.

¹⁴ Among respondents with less than three years of experience, the mean agreement was 3.14. By comparison, the mean agreement for respondents with between three and five years of experience was 3.48. For those respondents with between six and 10 years of experience, the mean agreement was 3.46, and for those with more than 11 years of experience, the mean agreement was 3.48 (all differences significant at $p < .05$).

Key Finding

Most journalists surveyed said they were generally satisfied with their jobs. The highest levels of job satisfaction were reported among journalists working in Tehran, those who held managerial positions, and those with more experience, respectively. Job satisfaction was lowest among those respondents who were more pessimistic about the levels of editorial freedoms that reporters are able to exercise.

However, in assessing other demographic and professional characteristics, our data show that:

- The perception that journalists are free to carry out investigative reporting varied according to the respondents' age: older respondents felt they had **greater leeway to conduct investigative reporting** than the younger reporters who participated in this survey.¹³
- The perception that journalists are able to question and investigate the actions of the government varied according to respondents' position: **journalists in managerial positions reported feeling less freedom** than respondents who held less senior positions in their organizations.
- The perception that the Iranian media are free to publish stories that present alternatives to the government's policies varied according to years of experience and education: **more experienced journalists and those holding a master's degree were more likely to report that journalists are free to publish stories that present alternatives to the government's policies** than journalists with less experience¹⁴ and education, respectively.

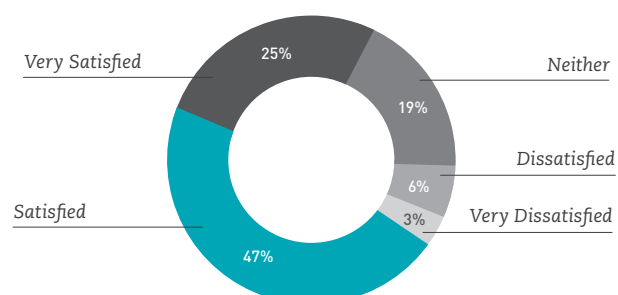
1.2 JOB SATISFACTION

Our survey also sought to measure the extent to which Iranian journalists are satisfied with their profession. We asked respondents to select whether they were "very satisfied," "satisfied," "neither," "dissatisfied," or "very dissatisfied" with their jobs as journalists.

Figure 7

REPORTED SATISFACTION WITH PROFESSION

Respondents were asked to rate their level of job satisfaction a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being "very dissatisfied" and 5 being "very satisfied."



According to our data:

- There were **no differences** in reported levels of job satisfaction between respondents working with state-run versus independent media outlets.
- **Job satisfaction was higher** among journalists working in Tehran compared to those working outside the capital.¹⁵
- Those in managerial positions were **more satisfied** with their jobs than those with no managerial or editorial responsibilities.¹⁶
- More experienced journalists (11 or more years of experience) expressed **higher job satisfaction** than those with fewer years (three years or less) of experience.¹⁷
- **Job satisfaction was lowest** among those respondents who were pessimistic about Iranian journalists' ability to conduct investigative reporting without fear of consequences, as well as their ability to question the government's activities.
- **Job satisfaction did not depend** on the respondents' gender, age or education.

¹⁵ The average job satisfaction was M=3.95 among those in Tehran versus M=3.63 among those outside the capital (difference significant at $p < .05$).

¹⁶ The average job satisfaction was M=4.0 among those in managerial positions versus M=3.74 among those working in non-managerial positions (difference significant at $p < .05$).

¹⁷ Respondents with more than 11 years of experience reported greatest satisfaction (M=4.15). Those with three years or less experience reported the lowest satisfaction (M=3.64).

1.3 ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES OF BEING A JOURNALIST IN IRAN

In order to elicit a more detailed picture of how Iranian journalists perceive their operating environment, respondents were asked two open-ended questions about the advantages and challenges of being a journalist in Iran. Answers were recorded verbatim and coded later by independent analysts.

Key Finding

Iranian journalists most frequently cite having access to news and information and the ability to provide information to the public as advantages of their profession. The lack of editorial freedom and censorship (including self-censorship) were cited as the main challenges for Iranian journalists, followed by financial and job insecurities.

¹⁸ In Figures 8 and 9, the responses do not add up to 100% because responses were assigned to more than one category.

Figure 8

THE FIRST QUESTION WE ASKED WAS: "IN YOUR VIEW, WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT ADVANTAGES OF BEING A JOURNALIST IN IRAN?"¹⁸

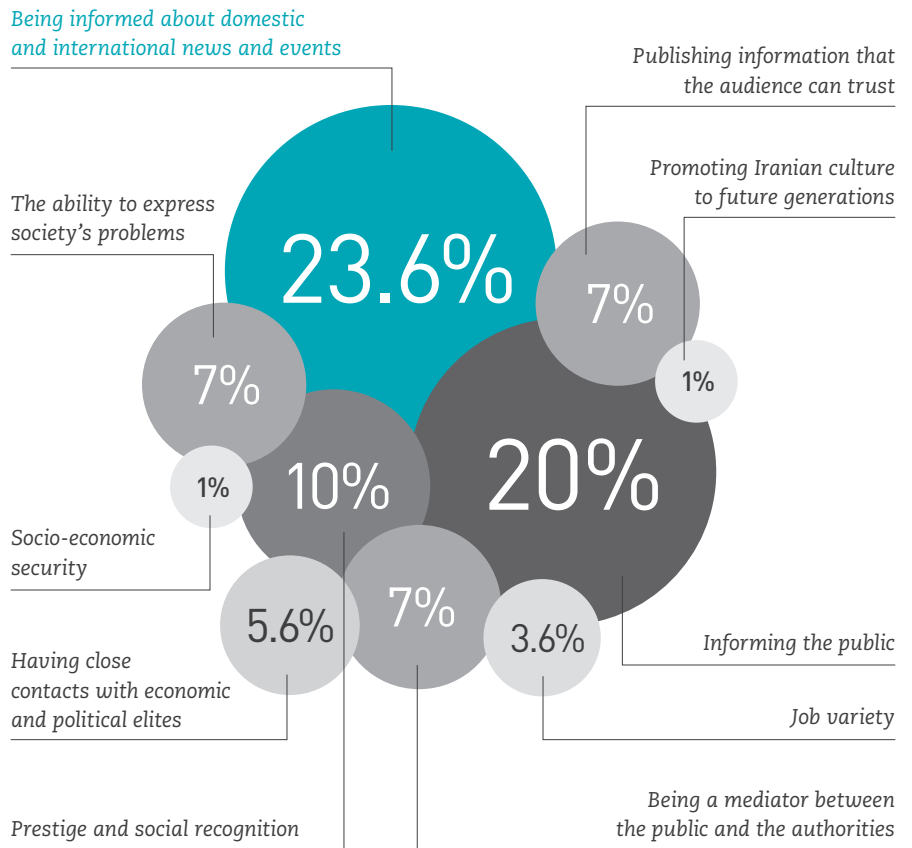
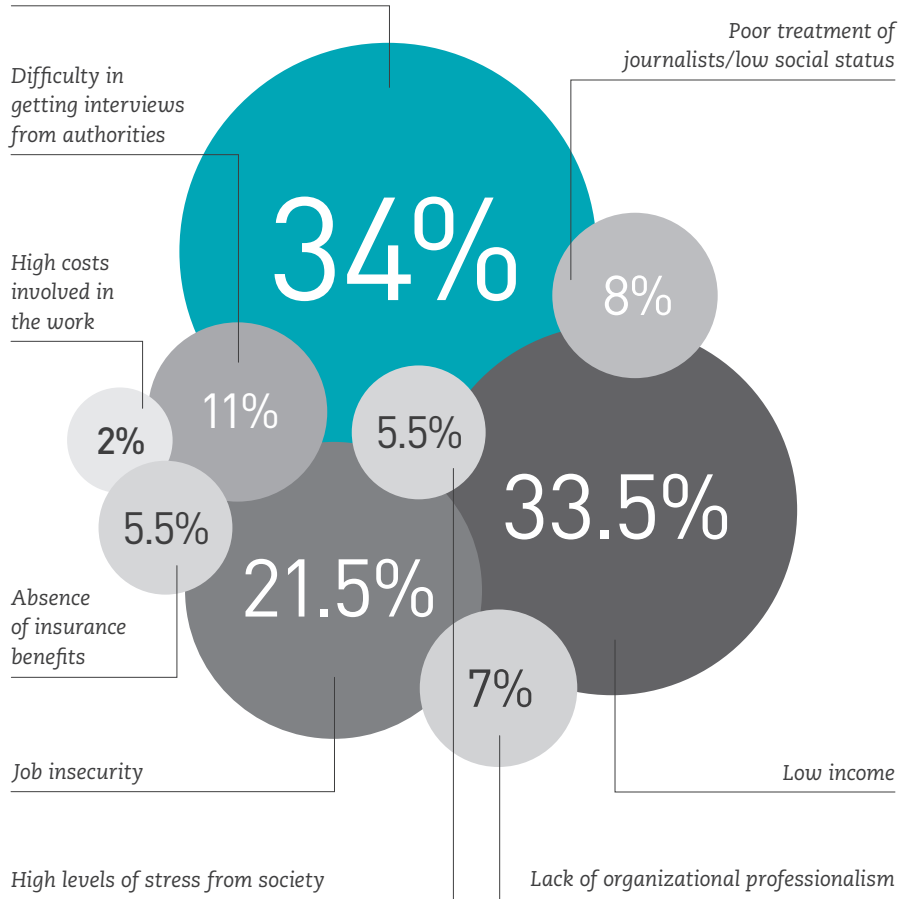


Figure 9

WE ASKED A SECOND OPEN-ENDED QUESTION: “WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT CHALLENGES OR THINGS THAT YOU DON’T LIKE ABOUT BEING A JOURNALIST IN IRAN.”¹⁹

Lack of editorial freedom, censorship, and self-censorship (“Fear of publishing news”):



¹⁹ 13.5% responded “did not know,” and 9% declined to answer.

II. Institutional Roles of Journalists and Professional Ethics and Principles

A second emphasis of our study was to investigate how Iranian journalists perceive their functions and roles in society, including their ideas about journalistic ethics and principles.²⁰ Our aim was to elicit responses about how Iranian journalists view their position in relation to both the public and to those in power. In addition, we sought to examine whether Iranian journalists believe in providing objective, impartial news that informs the citizenry, or whether they place more value on opinion-based analyses that promotes certain ideologies in order to sway public opinion.

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of the following institutional roles journalism and journalistic ethics and principles:²¹

- *Informing the public about events or issues that are important for their daily lives;*
- *Representing the public and their grievances against the government or authorities;*
- *Motivating people 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.*

Notably, no journalists responded that any of the five aspects surveyed were “not at all important.”

²⁰The term “institutional role of journalism” is drawn from the 2011 The Worlds of Journalism Study (see Hanitzsch et al., 2011), an academic project involving researchers from 80 countries that aims to assess the state of journalism throughout the world, as well as to measure the diversity of professional orientations among journalists across different cultures (<http://www.worldsofjournalism.org/>).

²¹These statements were taken primarily from The Worlds of Journalism Study (see Hanitzsch et al., 2011) and – similar to all questions used in this survey – were developed in consultation with the network of Iranian scholars and journalists and adapted to the Iranian context. Hanitzsch and colleagues (2011) identify three central areas in which journalism cultures materialize: the perception of the institutional role of journalism, epistemologies and ethical ideologies. Our questions mostly capture the institutional roles (the first four statements) and epistemologies (e.g., publishing only substantiated stories).

Responses to each of the five aspects are presented below, in order of most to least important:

Key Finding

Iranian journalists adhere strongly to the idea of public-interest journalism—following the classic media as the fourth estate model—and place high value on serving and representing the public rather than supporting political and economic elites. In addition, Iranian journalists consider providing objective, fact-based reporting as their most important role. Covering controversial and/or banned topics that cross “red lines” was seen as only slightly less important than the other elements tested; however journalists still consider this to be among their more important obligations.



PUBLISHING STORIES ONLY WHEN THEY ARE SUBSTANTIATED BY HARD EVIDENCE AND VERIFIABLE INFORMATION:

- There was no difference in responses based on any demographic elements—age, gender, location, experience, or position.
- There was no difference in responses between those who worked at a state-run or independent outlet.



INFORMING THE PUBLIC ABOUT EVENTS OR ISSUES THAT ARE IMPORTANT FOR THEIR DAILY LIVES:

- There were no differences in responses based on terms of age, education, location, or position within the organization.
- However, females assigned greater importance to this role than males, as did less experienced journalists compared to their more experienced counterparts.



REPRESENTING THE PUBLIC AND THEIR GRIEVANCES AGAINST GOVERNMENT OR AUTHORITIES:

- Journalists working for state-run media assigned greater importance to this role than journalists working for independent outlets.
- Less experienced journalists saw their role as “representatives” of the public as more important than their more experienced counterparts.

The importance of covering controversial issues steadily declined with experience, with less experienced journalists saying this was more important compared to their more experienced counterparts.

4

MOTIVATING PEOPLE TO PARTICIPATE IN CIVIC ACTIVITY AND POLITICAL DISCUSSION:

- Motivating people to participate in civic activity and political discussion ranked as the fourth most important institutional role.
- There was no difference in responses based on any tested demographic factors—age, gender, location, experience, position—including whether the respondent worked at a state-run or independent outlet.

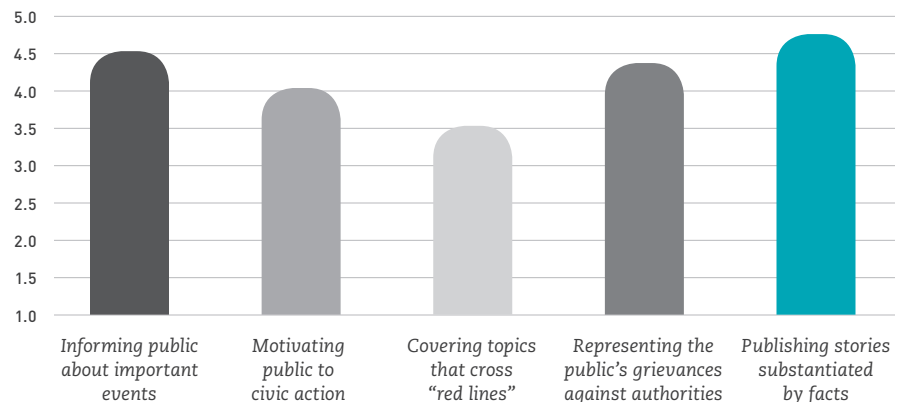
5

COVERING CONTROVERSIAL, AND POLITICALLY AND CULTURALLY SENSITIVE TOPICS THAT CROSS SO-CALLED “RED-LINES”:

- Female respondents thought covering such issues was more important than did males, as did those working in Tehran compared to those based outside the capital.
- The importance of covering controversial issues steadily declined with experience, with less experienced journalists saying this was more important compared to their more experienced counterparts.
- Those in senior or management positions thought that this role was less important than staff reporters or freelancers.
- Those respondents who thought that journalists could freely engage in investigative reporting assigned less importance to covering “red line” topics than those who recognized that investigative journalism may have negative consequences.

Figure 10

AVERAGE IMPORTANCE ASSIGNED TO THE INSTITUTIONAL ROLES AND PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AND PRINCIPLES: Note: (5-extremely important, 1-not at all important)



Key Finding

Both state and independent journalists rely most heavily on Web search engines (Google, Yahoo) for newsgathering and reporting, followed by traditional sources (original interviews). Journalists working for state-run media more frequently use traditional sources than independent journalists. Journalists who believe it is important to cover controversial topics that cross red lines rely more heavily on new media platforms than traditional sources. Notably, social media sites—Facebook, Twitter, blogs—are the least-used sources for Iranian journalists.

III. Journalists' Sources: Newsgathering and Reporting

The third focus of our survey was to address the various online and offline sources and tools that Iranian journalists use for newsgathering and reporting. Specifically, we sought to understand if and how reporters rely on traditional and new media sources, as well as how frequently journalists use online platforms to publish and distribute their stories.

We asked respondents to indicate how often—“always,” “often,” “sometimes,” “rarely,” “never”—they rely on various sources for producing news stories.

Figure 11

RESPONDENTS REPORTED THAT THEY “ALWAYS” USE THE FOLLOWING SOURCES (FROM HIGHEST TO LOWEST REPORTED PERCENTAGES):

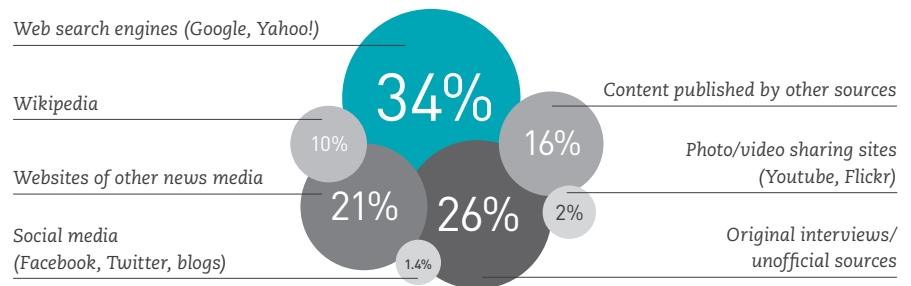
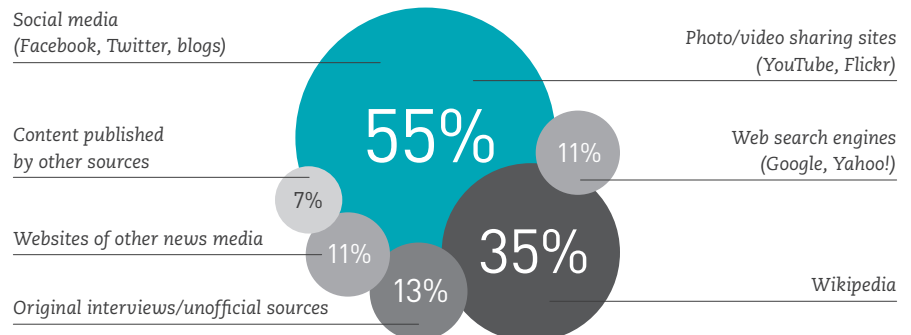


Figure 12

RESPONDENTS REPORTED THAT THEY “NEVER” USE THE FOLLOWING SOURCES (FROM HIGHEST TO LOWEST REPORTED PERCENTAGES):



*Journalists who assigned greater importance to their role in informing the public about issues important to their daily lives relied **less** on social media, Wikipedia and websites of other media organizations for newsgathering.*

Our analysis also shows that that state journalists reported greater reliance on traditional sources than independent journalists. This pattern could indicate that state journalists have better access to interviews with state officials than independent journalists.

There were no substantial differences between state and independent journalists in terms of their use of other newsgathering sources.

We also examined the use of various sources for newsgathering and publishing in relation to how respondents answered previous questions about editorial freedoms (see Section 1.1) and their institutional roles as journalists (see Section 2):

USE OF SOURCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL FREEDOMS:

- *Respondents who said that Iranian journalists cannot pursue investigative stories without fear of reprisal reported using search engines and social media more often than those respondents who said that journalists can pursue investigative stories without consequences.*

USE OF SOURCES AND REPORTED INSTITUTIONAL ROLES:

- *Journalists who assigned greater importance to informing the public about issues important to their daily lives relied less on social media, Wikipedia and also on websites of other media organizations for sources.*
- *Those who assigned greater value to covering controversial stories that cross “red lines” and to representing the public’s grievances against the authorities reported greater reliance on almost all new media platforms (with the exception of online social networks).*

A high percentage of respondents reported using **no** social media tools for publishing and circulating stories.

REGARDING THE USE OF NEW MEDIA FOR PUBLISHING AND CIRCULATING STORIES, OUR ANALYSES FOUND THAT RESPONDENTS RELY ON:

- Personal websites or blogs (35%)
- Social networking or link-sharing sites (16%)
- Photo/video sharing sites (7%)
- A high percentage of respondents (35%) reported using no social media tools for publishing and circulating stories.

According to our data, independent journalists were slightly more likely to report using a personal website or a blog than journalists with state-owned media outlets.

Figure 13

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEIVED INSTITUTIONAL ROLES AND RELIANCE ON NEW MEDIA FOR NEWSGATHERING AND REPORTING:

Note: The Y-axis represents the strength of the correlation, with positive numbers indicating positive relationship and negative numbers indicate an inverse relationship.

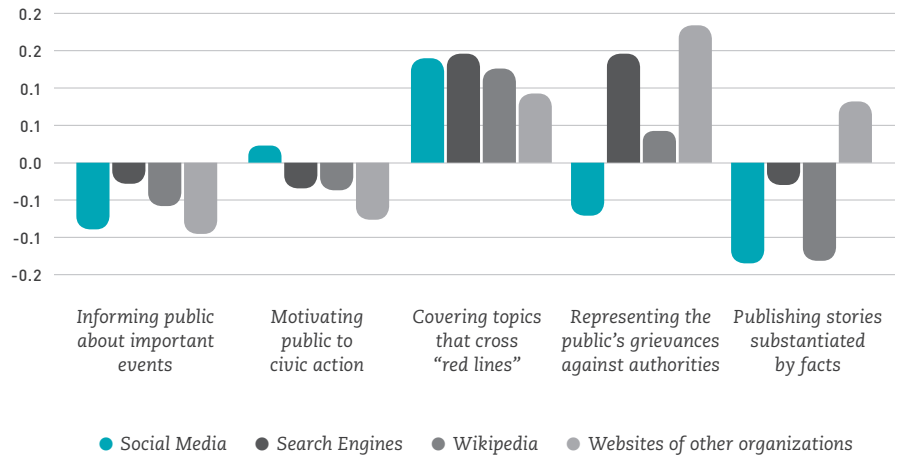
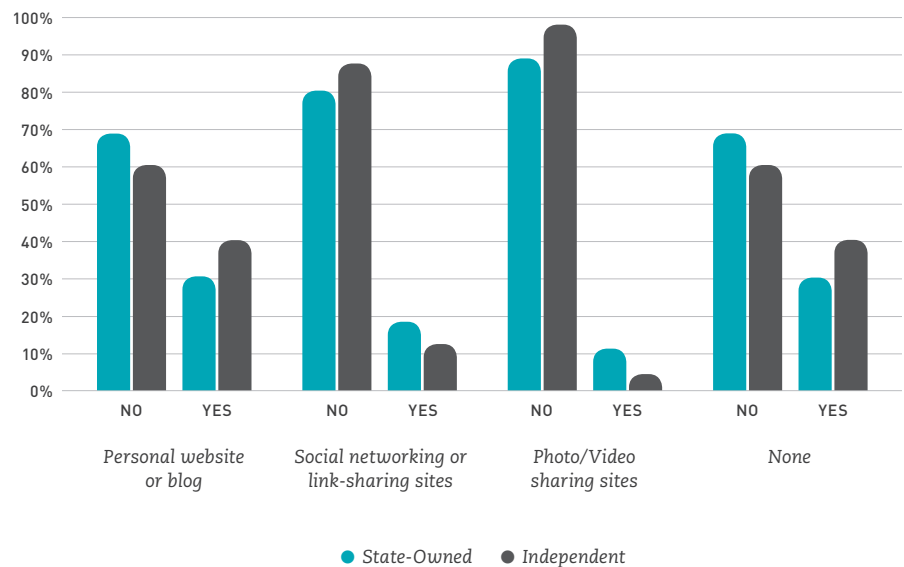


Figure 14

USE OF ONLINE TOOLS FOR PUBLISHING STORIES (STATE VERSUS INDEPENDENT JOURNALISTS):



Journalists with state-owned media and those working outside Tehran both reported greater ability in finding circumvention tools.

IV. Online Censorship

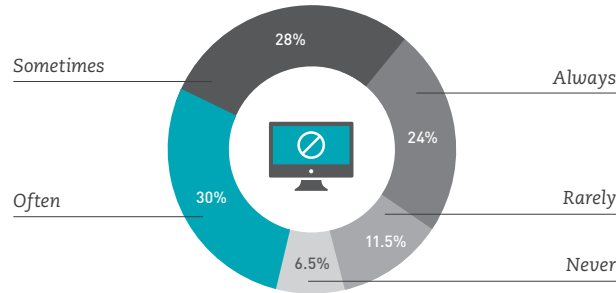
Given the pervasive and increasing levels of state control over online communications in Iran,²³ another key focus of our study was to look closer at how Iranian journalists perceive and contend with Web censorship. In particular, we sought to assess the extent to which online censorship is an obstacle for Iranian journalists in their ability to access and gather information. Our aim was also to investigate if and how journalists bypass filtered and blocked Web content with circumvention tools. As circumvention tools are illegal in Iran, we asked about the use of such tools in a series of hypothetical questions which became progressively more specific. (See Figure 15)

Journalists regularly encounter blocked and filtered websites but find accessing and using circumvention tools relatively easy. Journalists working for state-run media, those in managerial positions, and those working outside Tehran are more comfortable finding and using circumvention tools than independent journalists, journalists in non-managerial positions, and journalists working inside Tehran, respectively.

²³ A myriad of state bodies, ministries and security organs work to filter and block politically or culturally sensitive websites, which could impede the ability of Iranian journalists to access online information and to disseminate stories both within Iran and between Iran and the global community. See "Internet Censorship in Iran: An Infographic," the Iran Media Project, <http://www.iranmediaresearch.org/en/research/pdf/1296>.

Figure 15

FREQUENCY OF FILTERED/BLOCKED WEBSITES WHILE BROWSING THE INTERNET



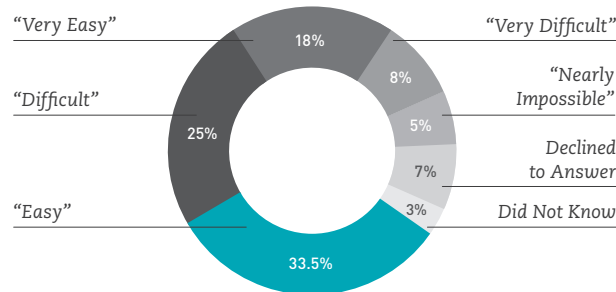
60%
Yes

The survey further inquired, using non-specific language to ensure the security and safety of respondents: "Some people use various online tools that help circumvent blocked websites. Have you ever heard about such tools?"

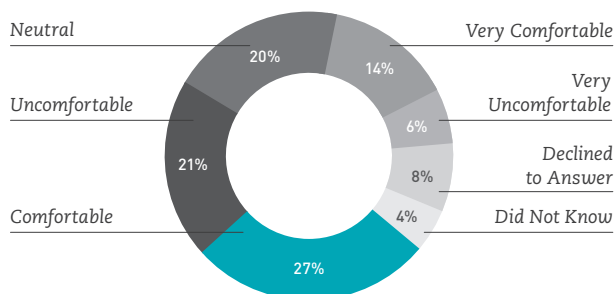
40%
No

SIXTY PERCENT (60%) OF RESPONDENTS REPORTED THEY HAD HEARD OF SUCH TOOLS.

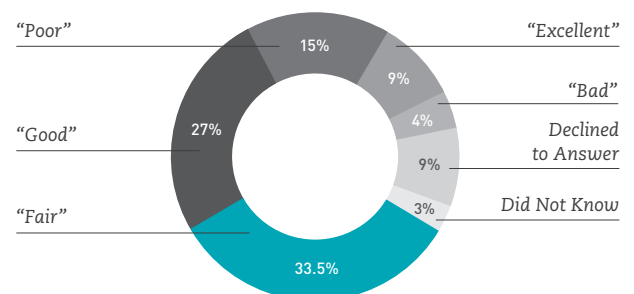
ACCESS TO CIRCUMVENTION TOOLS



COMFORT USING CIRCUMVENTION TOOLS



ABILITY TO USE CIRCUMVENTION TOOLS



As circumvention tools are illegal in Iran, we asked about the use of such tools in a series of hypothetical questions which became progressively more specific.

Respondents were asked how often they encountered filtered/blocked websites while browsing the Internet. **According to our data, a vast majority of respondents (82%) indicated encountering blocked or filtered web content (“often,” “sometimes,” or “always”).**

Respondents in managerial positions reported greater frequency of encountering blocked content online than staff reporters or freelancers.

The survey further inquired, using non-specific language to ensure the security and safety of respondents: “Some people use various online tools that help circumvent blocked websites. Have you ever heard about such tools?”

Sixty percent (60%) of respondents reported they had heard of such tools.

We then asked these respondents whether it would be “very easy,” “easy,” “neither,” “very difficult,” or “nearly impossible” to find and access circumvention tools.

Hence, a majority of this group (53.5%) reported that finding circumvention tools is either “easy” or “very easy,” compared to 38% who described this process as either “difficult,” “very difficult,” or “nearly impossible.”

According to our data, respondents in managerial positions reported feeling more comfortable using circumvention tools than those in non-managerial positions. Also, respondents working outside Tehran reported greater comfort using these tools than respondents working in the capital.

Lastly, respondents were asked to rate their ability to use such circumvention tools. According to our data, a majority (69.5%) of respondents rated their ability to use these tools rather positively—as either “fair,” “good” or “excellent.” By comparison, a combined 19% rated these tools as “poor” or “bad.”

Respondents working in state-run media, as well as those in managerial positions, reported greater facility using these tools than journalists from independent outlets, and those working in non-managerial positions, respectively.²⁴

²⁴It should be noted, however, that it is not clear how much certainty we can place on these findings and how much these responses tell us about the use of circumvention tools by Iranian journalists. Because using these tools is illegal in Iran and the survey was conducted in person, respondents may have been reluctant to openly report on their hypothetical experiences.

The climate of uncertainty produces an additional “chilling effect” for Iranian journalists, as reporters and editors are unable to predict the state’s reaction to publishing certain content, as well as the state’s posture toward certain media outlets and journalists.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that Iranian journalists operate within a highly restrictive environment as a result of stringent content regulations, pervasive censorship, and direct repression and harassment by authorities. Monitoring organizations like the Committee to Project Journalists and Article 19 provide important documentation of the state’s crackdowns on Iranian journalists—including cases of arrests, detentions, and imprisonment—as well as attempts by authorities to control the flow of information to Iranian citizens.

It is our goal with this report to further shed light on the normative and actual conditions in which Iranian journalists operate, wherein the regime has pursued an unpredictable and often inconsistent approach to censoring and punishing journalists. The climate of uncertainty produces an additional “chilling effect” for Iranian journalists, as reporters and editors are unable to predict the state’s reaction to publishing certain content, as well as the state’s posture toward certain media outlets and journalists.

Yet, as our findings demonstrate, Iranian journalists still strive to achieve high standards of journalistic professionalism, despite these constraints.

According to our findings:

- *Iranian journalists are aware of limitations on editorial freedoms—and generally do not feel free to conduct classic “watchdog” journalism or to investigate the government’s activities—however, they also indicate that they are able to present alternatives to government policies.*

In addition, most journalists surveyed also said they were generally satisfied with their jobs. Journalists working in Tehran, those working in managerial positions, and those with more experience, report highest degrees of satisfaction. Job satisfaction was lowest among those respondents who were more pessimistic about the levels of editorial freedoms reporters can exercise.

As our findings demonstrate, Iranian journalists still strive to achieve high standards of journalistic professionalism, despite these constraints.

- *Iranian journalists believe strongly in public-interest journalism, despite their inability to pursue investigative stories that openly challenge government policies. Specifically, Iranian journalists believe one of their primary roles is to serve the public, to inform the citizenry, and to serve as a watchdog of the political and economic elite. A majority place the greatest importance on providing fact-based, objective reporting, followed by informing the public about key events that can impact citizens' daily lives, and representing the public's grievances against authorities.*

Although covering controversial and/or banned topics that cross "red lines" was listed as their least important role, journalists still considered covering such topics to be an important function of their profession. Female journalists and those working in Tehran considered covering controversial topics to be more important than male journalists and those working outside the capital.

- *Both state and independent journalists rely most heavily on web search engines (Google, Yahoo) for newsgathering and reporting, followed by traditional sources (original interviews). Journalists working for state-run media rely more frequently on traditional sources than do independent journalists, which may indicate that state journalists have better access to officials than independent reporters.*

In addition, journalists who believe it is important to cover controversial topics that cross "red-lines" rely more heavily on new media platforms than traditional sources. Notably, social media sites—Facebook, Twitter, blogs—were cited as the least-used sources among Iranian journalists.

- *Although journalists regularly encounter blocked and filtered websites, a majority are also comfortable accessing and using circumvention tools. Journalists working for state-run media, those in managerial positions, and those working outside Tehran are more comfortable finding and using circumvention tools than independent journalists working in Tehran.*

Appendix

SAMPLE INFORMATION

From the available media organizations, which were selected and categorized based on the staff size, outlets for the final sampling frame were selected in descending order to reach the desired sample size. Due to the fact that no comprehensive listings exist in Iran, a fully random selection of respondents is not possible. The sampling process, however, was designed by the polling organization in collaboration with the researchers and experts on the Iranian media environment, assuring that the sampling frame and recruitment method produced a satisfactory systematic sample that aimed to represent Iranian journalists.

The final sample included seven national and three local widely circulated newspapers, 10 national and 10 local medium/small newspapers, seven national and 14 local widely circulated magazines, 20 and 70 medium/small magazines, three national news agencies (no local news agencies exist in Iran), the national and 10 local state-owned television stations (there are no private television stations in Iran), and 3 national and 10 local governmental/state-owned radio station (again, no private radio stations function in Iran). The number of organizations in the sampling frame was proportional to the number of listed media organizations in Iran.

Appendix Table 1 SAMPLING FRAME

MEDIA	ESTIMATED UNIVERSE		SAMPLE SIZE (NO OF UNITS)		SAMPLE SIZE (NO OF INTERVIEWS)	
	NATIONAL	LOCAL	NATIONAL	LOCAL	NATIONAL	LOCAL
Newspaper - Large/Widely Circulated	20	10	7	3	21	10
Newspaper - Medium/Small	28	42	10	10	20	20
Magazine - Large/Widely Circulated	20	40	7	14	15	30
Magazine - Medium/Small	70	2500	20	70	30	70
News Agency (e.g., Reuters)	10	0	3	-	9	-
TV - Govt./State-Owned	7	30	3	10	6	30
TV - Privately-Owned	0	0	-	-	-	-
Radio - Govt./State-Owned	9	31	3	10	9	30
Radio - Privately-Owned	0	0	-	-	-	-
Total					110	190