

Introduction

The Iranian government has had an uneasy relationship with the Internet. Top telecommunications and security officials have called the Internet “dirty,” “dangerous for societies,” a tool of “secessionists,” a threat to Iranian culture for promoting “liberalism” and “humanism,” and a place for “unethical business” and criminality.¹ In September 2013, Iran’s new moderate president Hassan Rouhani said, however, that he believes in the right of all Iranians to access online information and that his government’s efforts are aimed towards this end.² Still, he added that access to the Internet must fall within certain legal and cultural limits.³

Like many states, the Islamic Republic of Iran prioritizes what it censors, while weighing its domestic business needs, popular demand, and technical and resource limitations.⁴ Thus far, Iranian authorities have gone to great lengths to devise a legal and institutional framework that facilitates widespread censorship of the Internet.

From the Computer Crimes Law, which requires Internet service providers to block a wide range of online content, to the Supreme Council of Cyberspace's monopolization of regulatory control, state efforts appear to have been aimed at reining in a medium that is by its nature open and unruly.⁵

So what do Iranian state censors want to forbid Internet users from seeing or saying?

Iranian authorities have gone to great lengths to devise a legal and institutional framework that facilitates widespread censorship of the Internet. All state efforts appear to have been aimed at reining in a medium that is by its nature open and unruly.

¹“Ahmadi Moghadam: Internet is being used for terror inside the country,” Asr Iran, November 23, 2011, <http://goo.gl/zpaE8F>, (accessed October 14, 2013); “Setting

² Christiane Amanpour, “Raw: Hassan Rouhani full interview with Amanpour,” CNN, September 25, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZXXgm4cv8> (accessed October 1, 2013); Ann Curry, “Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani speaks in exclusive interview,” NBC News, September 21, 2013, <http://www.nbcnews.com/video/ann-curry-reports/53069190> (accessed October 1, 2013).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Note: Mahmoud Vaezi, current minister of Communication and Technology, stated that “there must be a healthy [family-friendly] internet at home so that it can be used without any concern, [with] the unethical part of the internet ... restricted in some way ... However, this restriction must not prevent the work of researchers, businessmen, and industrialists rather they must well be able to carry out their activities through this platform.” See: “Minister of Communications’ good news for the Internet: 2 months notice to the operators for resolving the disorders,” Khabar Online, August 28, 2013, <http://khabaronline.ir/detail/310409/Economy/industry> (accessed October 14, 2013). For a discussion of how states weigh differing interests when pursuing Internet censorship see: OpenITP, Collateral Freedom: A Snapshot of Chinese Users Circumventing Censorship, April 2013, <https://openitp.org/news-events/collateral-freedom-a-snapshot-of-chinese-users-circumventing-censorship.html>, (accessed October 12, 2013).

⁵ For examinations of Iran’s cyber laws and institutions see: Article 19, Islamic Republic of Iran: Computer Crimes Law, 2012 <http://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/2921/12-01-30-FINAL-iran-WEB%5B4%5D.pdf> (accessed October 1, 2013); Iran Media Program, Internet Censorship in Iran: An Infographic, March 13, 2013, <http://www.iranmediaresearch.org/en/research/pdf/1296> (accessed October 1, 2013); Opennet Initiative, After the green Movement: Internet Controls in Iran, 2009-2012, February 2013, <https://opennet.net/sites/opennet.net/files/iranreport.pdf> (accessed October 1, 2013); Shamim Asgari, “Former Minister of Communication: Supreme Cyberspace Council Governs ICT in Iran,” Herald Boy, August 19, 2013, <http://www.heraldboyc.com/former-minister-of-communications-supreme-cyberspace-council-governs-ict-in-iran/1230/> (accessed October 1, 2013).

In international fora, officials often claim that policies limiting expression aim to protect public morality, child welfare, and restrict hate speech.⁶ However, human rights groups and UN bodies have asserted that Iranian authorities target a wider range of protected online expression including political speech, news, religious expression, and human rights documentation.⁷

Understanding what Iranian censors block on the Internet helps demonstrate what information officials find most objectionable as well as the extent to which Iran's Internet censorship policies may violate international law.

Wikipedia, the popular open-source online encyclopedia, provides a useful place to uncover the types of online content forbidden in Iran. As the freedom of information group Small Media explained, "Wikipedia, a website with a 'radically open' approach, poses a stark contrast to Iran's closed society."⁸ The collaborative nature of Wikipedia provides both a source of information and a forum for expression. Wikipedia allows any user to choose any topic of interest and create encyclopedia-style informational articles on that topic or add to, edit, and alter existing articles. The result is an online resource containing over 28 million pages, crowd-sourcing the collective knowledge of its over 41 million users to cover nearly every topic imaginable in 287 languages.⁹

Wikipedia is certainly popular among Iranians. In Persian, Iran's dominant language, Wikipedia contains over 317,000 articles, which are spread across more than 1.7 million addresses (i.e., URLs).¹⁰ In other words, in many cases multiple URLs lead to the same article. There are more than 360,000 Persian Wikipedia users—individuals who have contributed to or edited the site's content.¹¹ Persian-language Wikipedia is ranked twentieth in the world for number of articles and sixteenth for its number of users.¹² The number of Persian articles on Wikipedia increased tenfold between 2006 and 2013.¹³ Persian is also the 13th most edited Wikipedia language, meaning that users add or change articles at a remarkably high rate.¹⁴

There are more than 360,000 Persian Wikipedia users. Persian-language Wikipedia is ranked twentieth in the world for number of articles and sixteenth for its number of users.

Censorship of Persian Wikipedia is, in effect, a microcosm of Iran's broader censorship regime.

⁶ See: Shia News association, "Need some reformation in law: Javad Larjani," <http://india.shafaqna.com/opinion/item/8258-need-some-reformation-in-law-javad-larjani.html?tmpl=component&print=1> (accessed October, 13 2013); *Islamic Republic of Iran, Reply to list of Issues*, 103 session, September 12, 2011, CCPR/C/IRN/Q/3/Add.1, <http://goo.gl/CUnuGa> (accessed October 11, 2013).

⁷ Opennet Initiative, *After the green Movement: Internet Controls in Iran, 2009-2012*, February 2013, <https://opennet.net/sites/opennet.net/files/iranreport.pdf> (accessed October 1, 2013); *United Nations Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations of the Human Rights Committee: Islamic Republic of Iran*, 103 session, November 4, 2011, CCPR/C/IRN/CO/3, goo.gl/JPobNc (accessed October 11, 2013).

⁸ Small Media, "Closed society meets open information," April 12, 2013, <http://smallmedia.org.uk/content/81> (accessed October, 7 2013).

⁹ Wikimedia, "List of Wikipedias," http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/List_of_Wikipedias#All_Wikipedias_ordered_by_number_of_articles (accessed October, 7 2013).

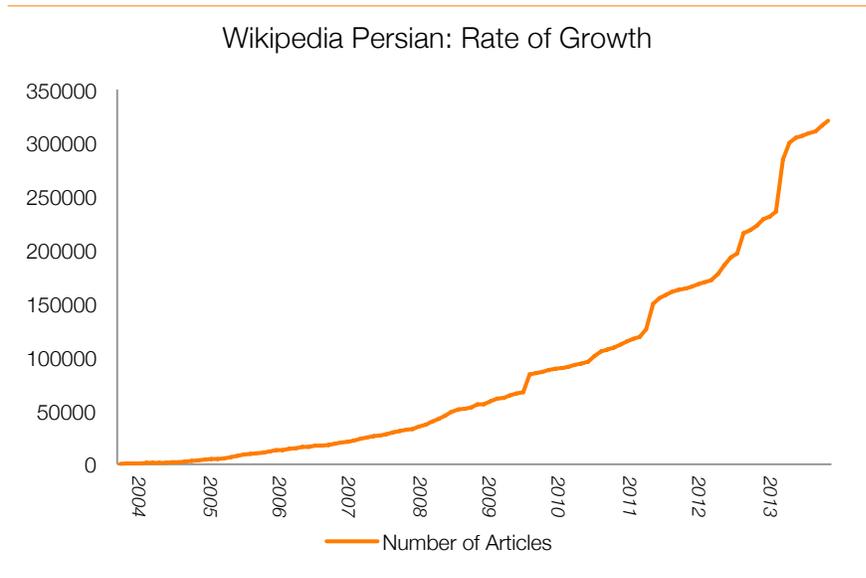
¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Wikimedia, "Wikipedia Charts Persian," <http://stats.wikimedia.org/EN/Charts/WikipediaFA.htm> (accessed October, 7 2013).

¹⁴ Wikimedia, "List of Wikipedias," http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/List_of_Wikipedias#All_Wikipedias_ordered_by_number_of_articles (accessed October, 7 2013).



Given its open source nature, the broad range of topics covered, and its large user-base, Wikipedia is the ideal environment for surveying the type of information and speech Iranian censors aim to block. Censorship of Persian Wikipedia is, in effect, a microcosm of Iran's broader censorship regime.

The Iran Media Program at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communications partnered with the Human Rights in Iran Unit at the City University of New York's Brooklyn College to test Iran's censorship of Wikipedia. The results presented in this report were provided in advance of publication to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Filtering Infrastructure and Methodology

Researchers employed proxy servers located in Iran to run every Persian-language Wikipedia URL and to collect data on user accessibility. Inaccessible Wiki-pages were then analyzed in order to extract themes and trends within the filtered content.

In the past, Iranian authorities have said that certain Wikipedia pages would trigger a response from the filter.¹⁵ The filtering of online content in Iran is based on monitoring for a set of blacklisted keywords and specific addresses.¹⁶ When a web browser in Iran requests a site that triggers the blacklist, the monitoring system will break the connection and send back a filtered-site notice instead.

¹⁵ "Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Wikipedia page has been filtered!" *Parsine*, August 19, 2013, <http://goo.gl/HyFjCw> (accessed October 16, 2013).

¹⁶ Collin Anderson, "The Hidden Internet of Iran: Private Address Allocation on a National Network," September 28, 2012, <http://arxiv.org/abs/1209.6398> (accessed October 12, 2013).

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These monitoring systems are located within a user's Internet Service Provider and the government-affiliated Telecommunication Company of Iran ("TCI"). The TCI provides the sole channel for accessing Internet content hosted outside of Iran.

It is difficult for a monitoring system to determine whether a website requested by a computer is actually located on the other end of a connection. That is why Iran's monitoring system bases its filtering decisions wholly on the information found in the request made by the user's browser, such as a URL. In order to evaluate this type of monitoring system, researchers can manually forge a request that appears to be destined for Wikipedia Persian and send that request to a testing server. A monitoring system like Iran's would assume the request was real and thus react the same way as if the host on the other side was actually Wikipedia, i.e., blocking requests that trigger the blacklist, or letting unobjectionable requests through. The testing server can then record if the connection is made or not. This simulation creates a controlled environment that allows researchers to generate predictable responses from the filter while controlling for other potential issues on the other end of a connection (such as misidentifying downtime on a target website as censorship) and avoiding the abuse of Wikipedia resources. This methodology was written into a custom test for the "Open Observatory of Network Interference" (OONI) framework, which provides analytics on the forms of potential interference on a user's Internet connection.¹⁷

The Wikimedia Foundation, the non-profit that operates Wikipedia, maintains public archives of all Wiki-sites under its control, including a list of all pages for each language and site.¹⁸ Researchers were therefore able to employ the methodology discussed above to test Iran's filtration of Persian Wikipedia. Computers inside Iran were set up to make requests to a test server. The requests were crafted to look as though they were destined for each individual Persian Wikipedia page (using the 'Host' header of fa.wikipedia.org). If the filter did not intercept a request, the test server received a response of 'true,' meaning the requested page was not blocked within Iran. Any response other than 'true' would indicate potential interference, meaning Iran's censors blocked the page.

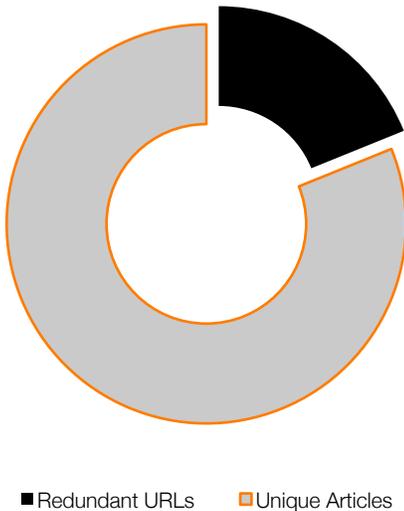
This test was repeated in two iterations, in January 2013 and April-May 2013. As Iranian filtration is fluid, there were slight variations between the tests, mostly resulting in more blocked pages being recorded during the second go-around. Thus, it should be assumed that by publication of this report, the makeup of blocked Wikipedia URLs in Iran would have changed to some degree. URLs evaluated by these tests could potentially have been blocked or unblocked.

¹⁷ Filastò, Arturo and Jacob Appelbaum. "OONI: Open observatory of network interference," August 2012, <https://www.usenix.org/system/files/conference/foci12/foci12-final12.pdf> (accessed October 12, 2013).

¹⁸ Wikimedia, Wikimedia Downloads, "Data Dumps," <http://dumps.wikimedia.org/> (accessed October 12, 2013).

Main Findings

Blocked Wiki-Articles



Iranian officials have in the past stated that certain Wikipedia content was filtered, reportedly for reasons of virtual “vandalism,” in the case of pages about public officials and morality.¹⁹ Wikipedia offers unencrypted (HTTP) and encrypted (HTTPS) access to the site. The encrypted version, which scrambles the connection to make it nearly impossible to filter specific pages, is blocked intermittently. The unencrypted version as a whole, however, is not censored in Iran. For example, a study by Small Media found that of the top 100 Persian-language Wikipedia pages, 15 were blocked, including entries about homosexuality, orgasms, former Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and activist rapper Shahin Najafi.²⁰

Tests identified 1,187 blocked Persian Wikipedia URLs that corresponded to 963 unique article pages. As noted above, in some cases multiple URLs directed the user to the same article. This duplication often resulted when an article’s subject could be identified by more than one term or when the named subject was not linguistically Persian in origin and multiple URLs were used representing multiple transliterations.

Iranian censors block websites by either using keyword filters (such as sexual terms) that indiscriminately block pages based on character patterns in their URLs, or by actively designating specific URLs as invalid. Of the 1,187 blocked URLs on Persian Wikipedia, 202 were filtered by 28 keywords and 985 were filtered directly as invalid sites. Of the 963 unique articles, 92 were filtered by invalid keywords and 871 as invalid sites. (For a list of keyword filters, see Annex A.)

Broadly speaking, blocked pages within this group fell into two areas: those with socio-political content and those with sexual content.

This report primarily analyzes the 963 unique articles that were blocked by Iranian censors. Broadly speaking, blocked pages fell into two areas: those with socio-political content and those with sexual content. These pages covered a wide range of topics, including articles explaining tenets of the Baha’i faith; a biography of *Harry Potter* actress Emma Watson; and entries about an infamous political assassination campaign known as the Chain Murders and its victims. More than any single topic, the events following the 2009 elections appear to be of particular concern to state censors.

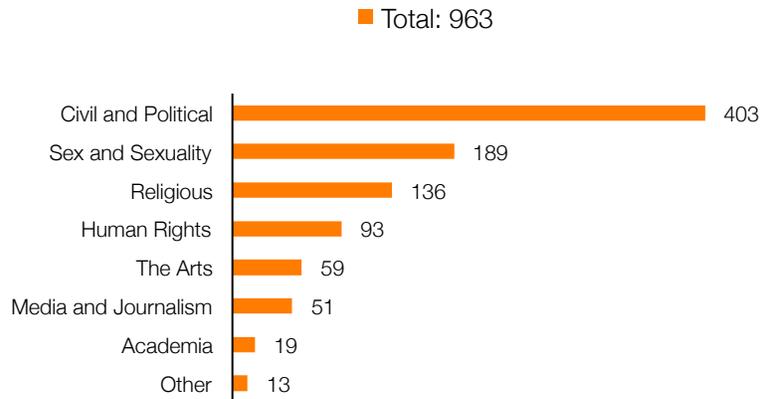
In all, researchers identified 10 categories of blocked Wiki-entries, equaling 403 articles relating to civil and political subjects, 189 involving sex and sexuality, 136 about religious matters, 93 focused on human rights, 59 involving the arts and culture, 51 about media and journalists, 19 blocked articles covering academia, seven

¹⁹ Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s Wikipedia page has been filtered!,” *Parsine*, August 19, 2013, <http://goo.gl/HyFiCw> (accessed October 16, 2013).

²⁰ Small Media, “Closed society meets open information,” April 12, 2013, <http://smallmedia.org.uk/content/81> (accessed 7 October 2013).

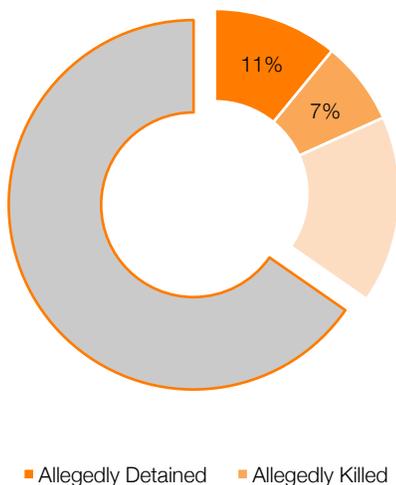
focusing on non-sexual profane topics, three discussing on drugs and alcohol, and three relating to other issues.

Blocked Wikipedia Articles by Theme



Within these categories, Iranian censors demonstrate a strong sensitivity towards online content about their political rivals, women’s rights, religious minorities, alternative belief systems, government critiques, or discussions of state abuses. Censors also show intolerance for sexual content, what they perceive as sexual content, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (“LGBT”) information.

Blocked Biographies 35% of all blocked pages



Fifty-three percent, or 511, of restricted Persian Wiki-entries were biographies, including those of artists, activists, political figures, government critics, state officials, academics, clerics, and journalists. A total of 161 of these biographies were of individuals whom Iranian authorities allegedly detained, likely arbitrarily, at one point in the past. Another 108 articles were about people allegedly killed by authorities—either by assassination, execution, abuse during detention or excessive police force during demonstrations.

Keyword filtering lead to what was, even from the Iranian government’s perspective, over censorship. Many inaccessible pages were automatically filtered after being mis-identified as containing sexual or profane content because of certain character patterns in the URL. To illustrate by analogy to English, if the character pattern s-e-x is blacklisted, the filter would block the website for Essex University (www.essex.ac.uk). Thus Iran’s keyword filters have blocked the Persian Wikipedia articles on Gozo Island in the Mediterranean, Cameroonian footballer Emmanuel Kundi, and even the Iranian village of Kaskan. These articles do not contain information that Iranian censors would likely find objectionable. Moreover, keyword filtering affects articles about sexual health and biology.

Last, nearly all, if not all, of the blocked Persian Wikipedia pages contain speech that is protected by international law as mandated by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (“ICCPR”). Moreover, in the vast majority of cases, there are no legitimate legal grounds, as defined by the ICCPR, under which the Iranian government could justify this censorship.

While this report focuses solely on the filtering of Persian-language content in Iran, researchers nonetheless found, using the same methodology described earlier, that the blocking of English-language articles was about as frequent and proportional.²¹

Civil and Political Articles

More than any other subject on Persian Wikipedia, Iranian censors blocked access to civil and political information. Researchers identified a total of 403 filtered civil and political articles, comprising 42% of the unique Wiki-entries blocked in Persian. Most of these articles—308 exactly—were about people. In other words, they were biographies about political figures, activists, politicians, government critics, alleged victims of state violence, protesters, and purported prisoners of conscience. Authorities reportedly detained 99 and were allegedly involved in the deaths of 101 of these individuals.

The legacy of the disputed 2009 elections, the ensuing social upheaval, and the state’s repression of protests and activists has given birth to a large number of Wikipedia entries. Iranian censors have filtered many, if not all, of these entries. Indeed, the state’s restriction of free expression by authorities after the 2009 election is mirrored in their patterns of filtration of Wikipedia Persian.²²

Of the 403 blocked civil and political articles, 129 related to the 2009 elections and their aftermath. Fifteen articles recount specific protests during this period while another 56 were dedicated to short biographies of individual protestors who were allegedly killed by authorities during street demonstrations or while in detention, such as Sorab Arabi, Shahram Farajzadeh, Neda Agha Soltani, and Mohsen Rouhallamini. An additional 23 entries related specifically to the post-2009 Green Movement. For example, these blocked pages included biographies of Green Movement leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi.

Iranian censors appear to limit information about other alleged episodes of political violence as well. Nine blocked Persian Wikipedia entries were about the crackdown on the 18 Tir (July 9)

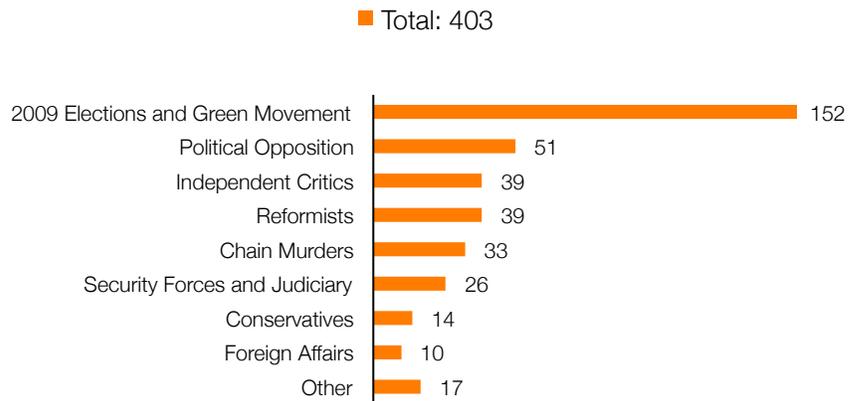
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²¹ A full list of blocked English Wikipedia pages will be made available at citationfiltered.org once data is fully processed.

²² For a discussion on post-2009 election repression see: Human Rights Watch, *The Islamic Republic at 30: Post-election abuses Show Serious Human Rights Crisis*, February 12, 2013 <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2010/02/11/islamic-republic-31-0> (accessed October 11, 2013).

student protests in 1999, and two of these were bios of students allegedly killed by security forces.²³ Eleven articles discussed the pro-democracy student movement, which is closely associated with 18 Tir. In addition, censors blocked 33 Persian Wikipedia articles about the “Chain Murders,” a series of assassinations of leading intellectuals, activists and cultural figures in the 1990s in which the Iranian Intelligence Ministry was publicly implicated.²⁴ Twenty-three of these “Chain Murder” articles present biographies of specific victims. An additional two blocked articles were about the execution of thousands of political prisoners in 1988.²⁵

Blocked Civil and Political Articles



Iranian censors blocked information about groups and individuals that could be described as government critics or opponents to the current political structure in Iran.

Beyond filtering articles about political violence and unrest, Iranian censors blocked information about groups and individuals that could be described as government critics or opponents to Iran’s current political structure. This information includes articles related to opposition groups, rival political factions, social movements, and dissidents.

Of this group, 38 blocked Wikipedia pages were about people, political parties, institutions, or events associated with the Reformist faction in Iran. Reformists tend to be political figures or civil society activists who advocate for civil liberties and democratic accountability within the framework of the Islamic Republic.²⁶ The Persian Wikipedia page about former Reformist President Mohammad Khatami, for example, was blocked.²⁷ Articles covering the reformist-oriented Assembly of Qom Seminary Teachers and Researchers and Farideh Mashini, a reformist activist, were also

²³ For a description of the state’s repression of 18-Tir protest see: Amnesty International, “Iranian Government must allow peaceful commemorations of 19 Tir events,” July 9, 2009, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/news/iranian-government-must-allow-peaceful-commemorations-18-tir-events-20090709> (accessed October 11, 2013).

²⁴ For documentation on the Chain Murders see: Akbar Ganji, *The Red Eminence and The Grey Eminences* (“Alijanab-i Surkhpush va Alijanaban-i Khakistari: Asibshinasi-i Guzar Bih Dawlat-i Dimokratik Tawsi’ahgara”) Tarh-i Naw, 2000.

²⁵ For a study of the 1988 mass executions see: Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, *The Massacre of Political Prisoners in Iran, 1988, Report Of An Inquiry*, April 18, 2011, <https://www.iranrights.org/english/document-1380.php> (accessed October 11, 2013).

²⁶ See: Daniel Tavana, “A Guide to Iran’s Presidential Election,” *Project on Middle East Democracy*, June 2013, <http://pomed.org/iran-election-guide-2013/> (accessed October 11, 2013); Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Iran*, Syracuse University Press, 2002.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

blocked. It may be that certain pages relating to Reformists were blocked because those individuals might have also been associated with, or tacitly supported, the Green Movement, which grew out of the Reform movement and the electoral challenge of two very prominent Reformist politicians.

Iranian censors also filtered several articles, mostly biographies, related to other Iranian ideological factions and opposition groups disapproved of by Iranian officials. This includes 14 articles related to religious nationalists, nine about the Mojahedin-e-Khalq, eight about the Kurdish movement, seven about leftists and Marxists, six about monarchists, and four about secular nationalists.

Censors filtered another 40 articles that discuss subjects or individuals that are generally critical of state policies but not strictly affiliated with a political faction or ideological strain: for example, dissident cleric Mohsen Kadivar and an extended article reviewing criticisms of speeches by former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Blocked Wikipedia Biography of dissident cleric Mohsen Kadivar

While the majority of blocked civil and political articles could be described as being about government critics or political opponents, 14 blocked Persian Wikipedia entries cover public figures associated with the Conservative and Principlist ideological faction.

Conservatives and Principlists tend to be pro-government hardliners opposed to fundamental reforms.²⁸ Iran's highest-ranking authorities usually favor Conservatives and Principlists.²⁹ Thus, intuitively, these pages should not be blocked. But given that Wikipedia is an open-source medium, these articles, like many Wikipedia entries in various languages, contained some criticisms of their subjects. For example, the Persian Wikipedia pages about Iran's Supreme Leader Ali

²⁸ See: Seyedamir Hossein Mahdavi, "Can Iran Surprise by Holding a "Healthy" Election in June?" *Middle East Brief*, 73, May 2013 <http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/meb73.html> (accessed October 22, 2013); Rasool Nafisi, "Iran's Majlis Elections: the hidden dynamics," *Open Democracy*, April 2008, http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/democracy_power/democracy_iran/majlis_elections_signals_of_change (accessed October 22, 2013).
²⁹ Ibid.

Khamenei and Tehran prosecutor Saeed Mortazavi, who was allegedly involved in various episodes of torture, were blocked.³⁰

Similarly, Iranian censors also filtered 26 articles about state and semi-state security forces and judicial institutions, including Evin Prison, which houses a large number of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience, and the national police force (*nirou-e entezami*).³¹ Another 10 filtered entries deal with seemingly sensitive topics in Iranian foreign affairs, such as an article on Iran-Israeli relations.

Several of these blocked civil and political pages rank as the most popular and active on Persian Wikipedia. Among the blocked articles that Small Media found within the 100 most-viewed Persian articles, four contained civil and political content, including an article about the Islamic Republic's founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.³² Another study scheduled to appear in the forthcoming book *Global Wikipedia: International and cross-cultural issues in online collaboration* identified the most controversial Persian Wikipedia pages by examining the number of existing reverts (i.e., an edit which completely undoes the previous edit).³³ Reverts can be performed by any user, including state actors, and thus can serve as a tool to restrict or shape speech.³⁴ Amongst the top 100 most controversial pages, 31 were filtered entries, including seven of the 10 most controversial.³⁵ Of these 31, 18 make the list of restricted civil or political articles discussed in this section, such as those about Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the hardline opposition group *People's Mojahedin Organization*, detained student leader Majid Tavakoli, and the 2009 election.³⁶

Sex and Sexuality Articles

The second-biggest category of filtered Persian Wikipedia pages were those related to sex and sexuality. Of the 963 unique Wiki-articles identified as blocked in Iran, a total of 189 entries pertain to sex and sexuality articles. Of these entries, 52 concern sex acts, 26 address anatomy and bodily functions, 17 relate to pornography, 13 discuss LGBT orientations and sexual orientation, eight involve sex crimes, eight are about female clothing (such as bikinis), seven relate

³⁰ For discussion of allegations against Saeed Mortazavi see: International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, *Death in Prison: no one held accountable*, June 2011, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2011/06/death-in-prison/> (accessed October 23, 2013); "Iran charges ex-prosecutor Saeed Mortazavi over 'murders'," BBC, February 27, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21590166> (accessed October 23, 2013).

³¹ Data on detentions of prisoners of conscience in Evin Prison can be found at: United for Iran, *Political Prisoners Database*, <http://ppd.united4iran.org/> (accessed October 22, 2013).

³² Small Media, "Closed society meets open information," April 12, 2013, <http://smallmedia.org.uk/content/81> (accessed October 7, 2013).

³³ Taha Yasseri, Anselm Spoerri, Mark Graham, and János Kertész, "The most controversial topics in Wikipedia: A multilingual and geographical analysis," *Global Wikipedia: International and cross-cultural issues in online collaboration*, Scarecrow Press, publication pending 2014, draft accessible at <http://arxiv.org/abs/1305.5566> (accessed October 1, 2013).

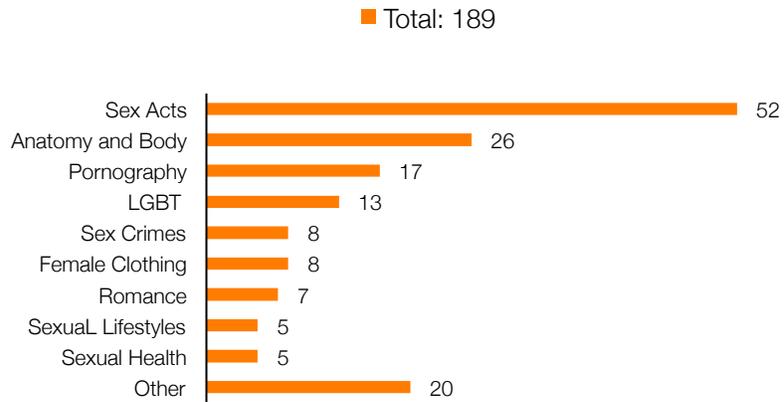
³⁴ Although Wikipedia has developed some monitoring designed to limit reckless or baseless editing, it is a volunteer based system and likely has few Persian language participants. See: Talk of the Nation, "Truth And The World Of Wikipedia Gatekeepers," NPR, February 22, 2010 <http://www.npr.org/2012/02/22/147261659/gauging-the-reliability-of-facts-on-wikipedia> (accessed October 14, 2013).

³⁵ Data provided by authors of "The most controversial topics in Wikipedia." On file with the Iran Media Program.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

to romance, five discuss sexual lifestyles, and five are about sexual health.

Blocked Sex and Sexuality Articles



Sex and sexuality seem to be the chief target of keyword filtering. Of the 202 URLs and the 92 unique articles filtered using keywords, 179 and 78, respectively, were articles related to sex and sexuality. Analysts identified 28 keywords of which 26 were Persian sexual terms or sexual profanities, such as the words for “pimp,” “dick,” “breasts,” and “fag.” Other keywords include “fart” and “liquor.”

As a result of keyword filtering authorities blocked articles assumed to cover sex and sexuality are seemingly mis-identified [and] appear to be censoring content they likely have no objection to or might even believe is valuable. Indeed, keyword filtering blocked the Wikipedia pages about Kaskan and Kaskan Ghajagh, two villages in northeast Iran.

As result of keyword filtering, 28 of the 189 blocked articles assumed to cover sex and sexuality were seemingly misidentified as sexual. For example, articles on the Atoll Bikini coral reef in the Marshall Islands and on the chemical compound stearalkonium chloride appear to be blocked because they coincidentally contained filtered character patterns in their URLs that match sex-related terms. Thus authorities appear to be censoring content they likely have no objection to or might even believe is valuable. Indeed, keyword filtering blocked the Wikipedia pages about Kaskan and Kaskan Ghajagh, two villages in northeast Iran. In all, researchers found a total of 28 blacklisted keywords (all but two being sexual terms) that blocked 92 Persian Wiki-articles, 31 of which were effectively misidentified as sexual or profane. This form of over-censorship extends past Wikipedia: for example, the website www.no-porn.com was blocked by keyword filtering even though it is a resource for overcoming pornography addiction that contains no sexual images or explicit text.³⁷

Together, keyword and manual filtering were responsible for blocking 31 Wikipedia articles on sexual health, anatomy, and biological bodily functions. While these articles deal with the human reproductive system—and sometimes contain anatomical images—

³⁷ Opennet Initiative, After the green Movement: Internet Controls in Iran, 2009-2012, February 2013, <https://opennet.net/sites/opennet.net/files/iranreport.pdf> (accessed October 1, 2013).

they do so in a scientific or public health manner, providing information potentially valuable to the public. For example, articles about safe sex and reproductive organs were blocked.

Similarly, many articles about sex acts are also scientific in nature, often providing information about animal biology, including pages on intercourse and human intercourse. Some of these pages do contain anatomical images, which might be what censors find objectionable, but many were filtered by keywords indicating the images were often not a determinative concern.

Some limitations on the distribution and publishing of pornography, usually in the interest of protecting minors, are regarded as permissible under international human rights law.³⁸ Articles related to pornography on Persian Wikipedia, however, should be understood as different from pornography itself. Most of these entries simply discuss what pornography is in an encyclopedia-like format or offer biographies of adult film actresses. None of them discuss topics associated with child pornography.

Censorship of Wiki-articles about clothing seems to be solely about female sexual anatomy. For example, articles about brassieres and bikinis were blocked. We observed no filtration of Wiki-entries about male articles of clothing.

Religion Articles

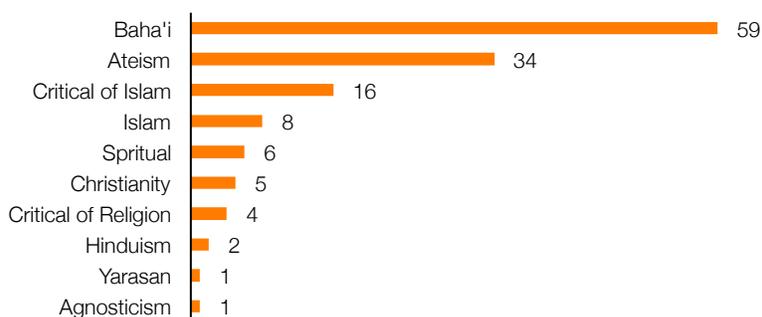
According to UN bodies and rights groups, Iranian authorities have a history of repressing religious groups and beliefs they find objectionable.³⁹ When it comes to Persian Wikipedia, state censors blocked 136 entries related to religion. For example, articles on the Baha'i prophet Bahauddin, a Hindu guru named Osho, neo-atheism, and the Catholic practice of Lent were filtered.

³⁸ Article 17 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child ("CRC"), to which Iran is a party, says that states "shall ensure that the child has access to information ... especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health." This article has been understood by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the body charged with monitoring the CRC, to require parties to take "measures, including legal ones, to protect children from harmful effects of the printed, electronic and audio-visual media, in particular violence and pornography." See: Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child: Japan, 18 session, June 24, 1998, CRC/C/15/Add.90, <http://tb.ohchr.org/default.aspx?Symbol=CRC/C/15/Add.90> (accessed October 11, 2013); The Optional Protocol to the CRC, which Iran has not signed or ratified, also restricts the manufacturing, distribution, sale or purchase of child pornography. The Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression has affirmed that restriction of child pornography is consistent with Article 19 on free expression in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a state party. He warned however that recognized limits on Article 19 must not be abused by governments and lead to censorship of or a chilling effect on protected speech. See: United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression: Frank La Rue*, 17 session, May 16, 2011, A/HRC/17/27, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomOpinion/Pages/Annual.aspx> (accessed October 14, 2013).

³⁹ For a discussion of religious persecution in laws and policies in Iran see: United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 22 session, February 28, 20013, A/HRC/22/56, <http://www.shaheedoniran.org/english/dr-shaheeds-work/latest-reports/3135-special-rapporteurs-february-2013-report-on-the-situation-of-human-rights-in-the-islamic-republic-of-iran.html> (accessed October 11, 2013); International Federation of Human Rights Defenders, *The Hidden Side of Iran: discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities*, October 2010, <http://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/irandiscrimLDDH1545a.pdf> (accessed October 14, 2013); International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, *Cost of Faith: Persecution of Protestant Christian and converts in Iran*, January 2013, http://www.iranhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/Christians_report_Final_for-web.pdf (accessed October 14, 2013).

Blocked Religion Articles

■ Total: 136



The Baha'i faith is Iran's largest non-Muslim minority religion, and arguably the nation's most persecuted religious group.⁴⁰ Iranian religious authorities often regard it as a heretical deviation from Islam.⁴¹ Fifty-nine blocked entries discussed tenets of the Baha'i faith or important Baha'i individuals and institutions, such as entries about Baha'i prayers, the Baha'i holy book *Hidden Words*, or the faith's governing institution, the Universal House of Justice.

Fifty-nine blocked entries discussed tenets of the Baha'i faith or important Baha'i individuals and institutions.

Authorities also filter Wiki-pages about other minority faiths, including five on Christianity, two on Hinduism, one on the Yarasan religion, and six related to various spiritual movements in Iran, such as a biography of spiritual leader and alternative healer Mohammad Ali Taheri. Blocked articles on Christianity, a recognized minority religion in Iran, include entries about Pastors Mehdi Dibaj and Hiak Hovsepian, who were killed under suspicious circumstances in the 1990s. Censors have also filtered entries about Lent and the Trinity.

In addition, Iranian censors filtered eight Persian Wikipedia entries related to Islam. The majority of these pages, six in total, relate to the Gonabadi Sufi order, which the government has reportedly persecuted in recent years.⁴²

The remaining filtered Persian Wiki-pages were about topics adverse to religion, including 34 related to atheism, four critical of religion generally, and one on agnosticism. This includes 16 entries about prominent scientist and fervent atheist Richard Dawkins and several of his major works, even a few that do not seem to specifically discuss atheism. The pages about topics generally critical of religion include, for example, entries about *The End of Faith*, a book arguing

⁴⁰ For discussion of Baha'i persecution see: Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, *A Faith Denied: The Persecution of the Baha'is of Iran*, 2006 <http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/publications/reports/3149-a-faith-denied-the-persecution-of-the-baha-is-of-iran.html#.UIVtqSSoUdA> (accessed October 11, 2013).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² See: United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 22 session, February 28, 2013, A/HRC/22/56, <http://www.shaheedoniran.org/english/dr-shaheeds-work/latest-reports/3135-special-rapporteurs-february-2013-report-on-the-situation-of-human-rights-in-the-islamic-republic-of-iran.html> (accessed October 11, 2013).

against organized religion, and the “Flying Spaghetti Monster,” a movement satirizing religious dogma.

Sixteen blocked Wiki-entries also deal with topics that were either critical of Islam or likely deemed as such by the government. These blocked articles include entries about *Islam: What the West Needs to Know*, a documentary portraying Islam as inherently violent, and Geert Wilders, a Dutch politician known in part for negative views towards Islam and Muslims.

Human Rights Articles

By making human rights entries off-limits, Iranian censors are effectively expunging criticisms of the government's human rights record.

Information about Iran's human rights record or Iranian human rights defenders is severely restricted on Persian Wikipedia in Iran. Government censors filtered 93 Persian language articles concerning human rights.

Fifty-six articles were biographies of individual human rights defenders, including Narges Mohammadi and Mohammad Seddigh Kaboudvand. Of these 56, 13 were about human rights lawyers, such as Mohammad Ali Dadkhah. Authorities have reportedly detained at least 34 of these rights advocates.

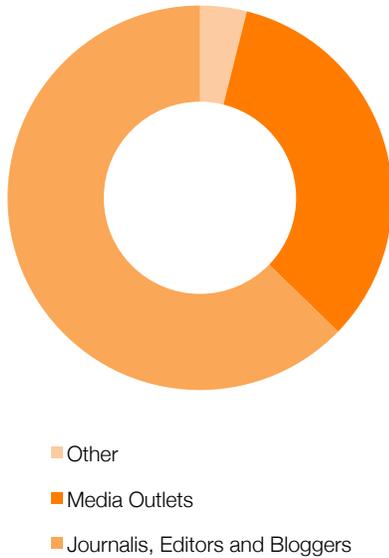
Out of the 93 total articles about human rights issues, 14 blocked Wiki-entries were about human rights organizations or campaigns. For instance, pages about Human Rights Watch and Committee of Human Rights Reporters of Iran were filtered.

Tests uncovered another 19 blocked articles discussing alleged abusive practices attributed to Iranian security forces and judicial authorities. State censors, for example, have filtered Persian Wikipedia pages about stoning, censorship, “white torture” (i.e., psychological torture), juvenile executions, and crimes against humanity in Iran. By making these types of entries off-limits, Iranian censors are effectively expunging criticisms of the government's human rights record from Wikipedia.

On a thematic level, Iranian censors have filtered a notable number of women's rights-related articles—31 in total—or a third of all blocked human rights entries. These entries include articles about the concept of sexism and prominent women's right defender Mehranghez Kar. Results showed that censorship of women's rights information was common within other categories as well. For example, about half the blocked pages related to academia were of women's studies scholars. Other blocked human rights-related articles dealt with ethnic rights, prisoners' rights, free expression, torture, LGBT rights, child rights, labor rights, and the right to education.

Media and Journalism Articles

Blocked Media and Journalism Articles



Tests found 51 blocked Persian Wikipedia entries concerning media and journalism. Sixteen of these entries were about media outlets, including four on foreign media such as BBC Persian, four on social media including Facebook, four on Green Movement outlets such as *Kalameh*, two on women's rights publications, one on a reformist newspaper, and one on the official state broadcaster *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting* ("IRIB"). In nearly every instance, the actual website of the media outlets featured in these filtered Wiki-pages was itself also filtered (except for the IRIB).⁴³

Another 32 filtered entries were biographies of individual journalists, editors, and bloggers. The filtered biographies featured people known for their critical reporting, detention, or work with foreign media. Among these 32, authorities had at one time reportedly arrested and detained at least 23 of them. Another three editors worked at publications that authorities had allegedly shut down.

In addition, one blocked article explained what an Internet proxy is, and another was a summary of journalist arrests in Iran.

Artistic and Cultural Articles

The 59 filtered Persian Wikipedia entries covering artistic and cultural subjects contain themes that mirror other censored Wiki-articles. For example, pages about *Persepolis*, a graphic novel about post-revolutionary Iran; Mohsen Namjoo, a boundary-pushing Iranian singer; and samba, a form of Brazilian dance, were blocked.

Blocked Biography of Harry Potter Actress Emma Watson

⁴³ Researchers ran a test in May 2011 evaluating filtration of 70 online news outlets in Iran which confirmed that for nearly every media outlet that there was a blocked Wikipedia page for, the site was also itself blocked. Test results on file with the Iran Media Program.

Filtered entries that contain information about artists and art included those that could be deemed critical of society (11), religiously blasphemous (10 entries), political (10), sexual (9), feminist (5), or LGBT-positive (3). Another six filtered Wiki-articles contain biographies of young western actresses and female celebrities, including *Twilight* star Kristen Stewart, *Harry Potter* actress Emma Watson and British pop singer Cheryl Cole. Another three filtered pages were about Eurovision, a popular televised singing competition.

Conclusions and Legal Observations

Nearly all of these censored Wikipedia pages contain speech that is protected by international law.

Iran's censorship of Persian Wikipedia certainly targets a wide breadth of political, social, religious and sexual themes. Censorship is predominantly aimed at restricting access to information related to the Iranian government's human rights record and individuals who have challenged authorities. Pages about disfavored beliefs, religions and sexuality are also prohibited. Importantly, nearly all of these censored Wikipedia pages contain speech that is protected by international law—namely Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (“ICCPR”)—to which Iran is a state party.

Article 19 mandates that:

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.⁴⁴

The UN Human Rights Committee, charged with monitoring implementation of the ICCPR, has made clear that Article 19 protects:

[P]olitical discourse, commentary on one's own and on public affairs, canvassing, discussion of human rights, journalism, cultural and artistic expression, teaching, and religious discourse ... even expression that may be regarded as deeply offensive, although such expression may be [under narrow circumstances] restricted. [Article 19] protects all ... means of ... dissemination ... including all forms of audio-visual as well as electronic and internet-based modes of expression.⁴⁵

These types of speech and information are exactly what Iranian authorities are blocking on Persian Wikipedia and thus Iran's actions are at odds with its international legal obligations under the ICCPR.

⁴⁴ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No.16) at 52, UN Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976, ratified by Iran in 1975, art. 19.

⁴⁵ United Nations Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 34, Freedoms of Opinion and Expression, 102 session, 2011, CCPR/C/GC/34, paras. 11 and 12.

The UN Special Rapporteur expressed specific concern over “increased restrictions on the Internet through the use of sophisticated technologies to block content [which] includes preventing users from accessing specific websites ... domain name[s] ... or using filtering technologies to exclude pages containing keywords or other specific content.”

Not surprisingly, the Committee expressed concern over Iran's Internet censorship policies during a 2011 review of the country.⁴⁶

The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression—in his 2010 report—provided a functional application of ICCPR Article 19 protections in the context the Internet. He first made clear that Article 19 applies fully “to new communication technologies such as the Internet,” adding that “the Internet has become a key means by which individuals can exercise their right to freedom of opinion and expression, as guaranteed by Article 19.”⁴⁷

The Special Rapporteur expressed specific concern over “increased restrictions on the Internet [worldwide] through the use of increasingly sophisticated technologies to block content ... [which] includes preventing users from accessing specific websites, Internet Protocol (IP) addresses, domain name extensions ... or using filtering technologies to exclude pages containing keywords or other specific content from appearing.”⁴⁸ He noted that:

*States' use of blocking or filtering technologies is frequently in violation of their obligation to guarantee the right to freedom of expression.*⁴⁹

As explained above, Iran's censorship of Wikipedia and the wider Internet employs some of the methods outlined by the Special Rapporteur, including blocking domain name extensions and keyword filtering. When viewed against the content censored on Wikipedia, Iran's application of these methods is often abusive, giving censors the ability to aggressively restrict Internet speech and undermine ICCPR guarantees.

It should be noted that the Iranian government often invokes ICCPR Article 19(3) in defense of its digital and non-digital censorship. This provision provides narrow exceptions allowing states to restrict some expression and information according to strict criteria.⁵⁰ Upon analyzing the 963 blocked Persian Wikipedia entries discussed in this report, researchers found almost no cases in which blocking was permissible under the ICCPR. (A detailed legal analysis on Iran's compliance with Article 19(3) is available at citationfiltered.org.)

It bears mentioning that keyword filtering, as an indiscriminate tool, runs contrary to the narrow exceptions specified under Article 19(3). The article requires any state-imposed restrictions on free expression to be narrowly tailored in a manner that avoids undue

⁴⁶ United Nations Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations of the Human Rights Committee: Islamic Republic of Iran, 103 session, November 4, 2011, CCPR/C/IRN/CO/34, goo.gl/JPobNc (accessed October 11, 2013).

⁴⁷ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression: Frank La Rue*, 17 session, May 16, 2011, A/HRC/17/27, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomOpinion/Pages/Annual.aspx> (accessed October 14, 2013).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ The Islamic Republic of Iran, The Iranian Government's comments on the Special Rapporteur's report, September 2013, <http://goo.gl/P7BxYg> (accessed October 11, 2013).

infringement on protected expression. As the object and purpose of the ICCPR is to protect and not limit speech, the Human Rights Committee warns that “restrictions on the exercise of freedom of expression ... may not put in jeopardy the right itself,” “must not be overbroad,” and “must [use] the least intrusive instrument.”⁵¹

The Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression made clear that:

[Internet] blocking measures [should not] constitute an unnecessary or disproportionate means to achieve the purported aim, as they are often not sufficiently targeted and render a wide range of content inaccessible beyond that which has been deemed illegal.⁵²

Keyword filtering utilized by Iranian censors cannot and does not distinguish between types of content, resulting in the accidental censoring of dozens of random Wikipedia entries and an undetermined number of other webpages. As such it is a particularly problematic censorship method for Iran and state parties to the ICCPR.

⁵¹ United Nations Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 34, Freedoms of Opinion and Expression, 102 session, 2011, CCPR/C/IRN/CO/34, paras. 21 and 34.

⁵² Ibid.

Appendix A: Invalid Keywords

1. balls / testicles خاپه خاپه	11. faggot کونی کونیم	21. penis / wiener دودول
2. bikini بيکینی	12. faggot کونده	22. prostitute فاحشه
3. bra سوتین سوتین	13. faggotry همجنسبازی	23. porn پورن پورنو (porno)
4. breast پستون	14. fetish فتیش فتیش	24. sex سکس سکسی (sexy)
5. clit چوچوله	15. fucking گایدن گایدن	25. sexual desire شهواني شهوانی
6. cock کیر کیرش (his cock) کیری (dickish)	16. fucking گانیدن گانیدن	26. the thing between one's legs لاپایی
7. cunt کس	17. homo همجنسباز	27. whore جنده
8. curves / butt قنبل	18. lesbian لزیبن لزیبن	28. XXX
9. ecstasy اکستازی	19. lick / flirtation لاسیدن لاسیدن	
10. fart گوز گوزو (farter)	20. liquor مشروب	

citationfiltered.org