A Safe Refuge? Minorities and the State in Iranian Cyberspace

Bronwen Robertson, James Marchant

Small Media Foundation

The Iranian state has consistently restricted spaces in open society for minorities to express their identities, especially where such identities are construed as representing a threat to the religious, political and sexual orthodoxies promulgated by the clerical establishment. As a result, many members of assorted Iranian minority groups have taken to cyberspace to build communities, articulate self- and group-identities, organise to overcome discriminatory practices, and connect with their allies from across national borders and around the world.

With the election of the moderate Hassan Rouhani to the presidency in July 2013, and the civil rights pledges made in his 'Citizen's Charter', there were renewed (if guarded) hopes for an improvement in the position of Iran's minorities, though tangible improvements have been slow to materialise over the past three years. Given that the state is slow to take steps that would improve the position of Iran's minorities, it is ultimately down to these communities to organise and find solutions to their myriad concerns.

This Iran-focused edition of CyberOrient aims to explore how Iranian minority groups have embraced technology to overcome systematised state discrimination, strengthen communities, and at the same time, push back against entrenched societal prejudices.

To begin, in his paper *Online Social Research in Iran: A Need to Offer a Bigger Picture*, Ali Honari casts an eye over the state of the Iranian web today, identifying the country's core online communities, their primary forums of

discussion, and the characteristics of users in these spheres. Offering some interesting suggestions for Iranian social media analysis, it is a welcome contribution to the discussion around Iranian activities in cyberspace.

Ahmed Al-Rawi's and Jacob Groshek's paper Arab Iranians and their Social Media Use delves into the social media engagement patterns of Iran's marginalised Ahwazi Arab minority, and argues that the community is being caught up in the middle of the geopolitical tussle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It finds that fervently political state-sponsored activists from both Saudi Arabia and Iran are dominating discussions around Ahwazi identity, and drowning out the voices of other Ahwazis.

Also in this special issue, we have two papers examining other topics of interest from around the Middle East. Hakim Khatib's Semantic Structures That Unify and Divide analyses a series of images in order to reveal the semantic structures and signifying practices produced throughout the protests, and shed light on their social, cultural and historical roots.

A Page and its Politics: Kullinā Khālid Sa'īd in Egypt's Ideological Landscape at the Time of Revolution is a collaborative work from Robbert Woltering, Rasha Abdulla, Thomas Poell, Bernhard Rieder, and Liesbeth Zack, and analyses the content of the "We are all Khaled Said" Facebook page throughout 2011 to construct a picture of the ideological and political leanings of the popular revolutionary page.