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Trolls of the state

Iran's government doesn't just censor — it funds hate speech

Long before Elon Musk took over Twitter for an unbeatable handout of $44 billion only to rename it to X, hate speech had cast an ominous shadow on the Persian-language social media space. With the futuristic magnet's dismissal of half of the company's content moderators, 80 per cent of the engineers in the trust and safety department and almost the whole Ethical AI team, the floodgates of abusive language employed by users posting in Persian were opened.

For Iranian journalists and academics, who often need to navigate uncharted waters to maintain a sound online portfolio, the stakes have been higher. At times, they have subconsciously or deliberately changed their rhetoric when targeted by the benefactors of organised hate. There have been university professors and artists who have withdrawn from social media platforms to protect their well-being. In other cases, journalists have altered their reporting style, lowered their standards or modified their editorial guidelines to comply with the pressure groups.

Hate speech, online abuse and threats

Admittedly, hate speech, glorification of violence and gendered harassment have been universal trends across internet forums, and this is not exclusive to X. Yet, with TikTok being banned in Iran and Facebook not being a key component of the netizens' online diet, X has remained one of the main gateways to digital connectivity.

In a September 2023 study of the prevalence of misinformation during election campaigns in 16 select countries conducted by UNESCO and Ipsos, it was found that 67 per cent of internet users, including 74 per cent of those 35 and younger, had experienced online hate. People in the LGBT+ community, as well as racial minorities, have been the primary targets of such waves. Of the 16 nations, only in the uppermost cluster of countries with the highest human development index (HDI), social media was second to television, whereas in the group of countries with the lowest HDI, social media surpassed other outlets by a wide margin.

Patterns in Iran were not quantified in this specific study, but unpacking the overall picture of news intake habits, content production and digital communication is not difficult even without statistics. What is creeping through Persian social media is a reversal of the widely accepted norms of using online venues where members of real-life communities interact virtually.

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At least empirically, it is arguable that civil discourses devoid of vulgarity and *ad hominems* are now the exception in the apps and forums populated by Iranians. Few users with large followings – including journalists, TV personalities, academics and activists – are impervious to the inundation of their timelines with abuse and threats.

In many cases, celebrities are the ones who wilfully trigger hate-filled conversations and irrational polemics. Examples include self-credentialed journalists posting images of unpopular political figures on X with a one-line caption along the lines of 'comment is free: tell him/her what they deserve to hear.'

Cyber aggression is no longer about a clash of ideas in environments benefitting from anonymity and the absence of censorship. In exchanges that supposedly begin to be a polished dissection of disagreements, Iranian users often end up wishing each other harm, insulting their respective female relatives, and if they don't trade death threats, they conclude by blocking their interlocutor and announcing it.

Compared to hate speech in other geographical and lingual settings, violent rhetoric in the Iranian infosphere has taken a radical turn, and the basic measure of tolerance the consumers of normatively contraband services such as instant messaging apps afforded each other in debates about politics and religion is vanishing. Users, mostly with dubious or impersonated identities, produce entire sentences punctuated with successions of derogatory lexemes, some of which were previously unheard of in Persian, known for its poetic charm. These messages, which they leave in reaction to those they disagree with, almost unanimously incorporate a gendered element.

If the addressee is a woman, especially journalists whose public profile makes them susceptible to forthright criticism, they must brace for an avalanche of rape threats, catcalling and other forms of explicit language. If the target is a man, the expletives would be aimed at three main female figures in their family: the wife, the mother and the sister.

State-sponsored hate speech

Not that online hate is bound to specific communities. Even flawless democracies are wrestling with the question of how to educate their netizens to use modern technologies for the common good and to leave imprints they can be proud of in retrospect. But in autocracies like Iran, where state-sponsored ideologies fuel radicalism, the crisis of digital life is worsened by the active role of governments encouraging and financing hate collectives.

The Islamic Republic has created a shady network of 'media activists' who have been granted the unlimited resources they need to push for their coercive agendas through campaigns against individuals, groups or causes. These opaque fraternities are mobilised whenever the establishment doesn't wish to directly associate itself with gratuitous suppression, silencing a conversation and walking away clean.

In December 2021, supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei expanded on a term he had first broached in 2016: 'jihad of explanation'. He instructed his loyalists to use the luxury of online platforms to spread the message of the revolution and educate others about the achievements of the Islamic Republic. He insinuated that such a jihad, the Islamic term for 'strenuous effort', should involve countering the enemy's defamation of the regime.

As if a battalion was ordered to go to the frontline, 'cultural centres' that mushroomed one after the other following his declaration rushed to Twitter and Instagram to accomplish the mission. Paradoxically, no matter the crude methods they used to communicate, they were bent on 'explaining' to the adversaries that the Tehran-headquartered theocracy, among others, was democratic, tolerant and an advocate of its people's welfare. Those refusing to agree would be earmarked for more coercion — they still needed more explanation.

The increased polarisation of Iranian online ecosystem is also entrenched through investment by dissident groups challenging the Islamic Republic.

Despite a lack of official figures, the British government has estimated that the Iranian government's cyber army consists of about 45 000 operatives. In 2019, Twitter deleted at least 4 800 accounts linked to the Iranian government implicated in spreading disinformation and targeting dissidents.

But the Islamic Republic's cyber army has not fully monopolised the campaigns of online intimidation. Diasporic lieutenants, championing

either side of the exiled opposition, namely the pro-monarchy and republican camps, have long wielded hate speech and misogyny to stifle their detractors. The irony cannot be overstated when the abusive keyboard warriors derive their credibility from marketing themselves as open-minded global citizens cherishing liberty, including equal rights for women.

The increased polarisation of Iranian online ecosystem is also entrenched through investment by dissident groups challenging the Islamic Republic. In 2021, Facebook closed nearly 300 accounts linked to the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organisation, formerly designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the Department of State.

On at least one occasion, the government of Albania, which shelters the MEK members in Durrës County, raided MEK camps after its members were found to be involved in risky internet activities. MEK members who still maintain their internet footprint, are awarded by-lines in mainstream newspapers and treated in extravagant events featuring European and US politicians.

How the ailment of bigotry crippling Persian-language digital public square can be cured is not a straightforward question to answer. A blend of anthropological, social and political factors accounts for why this crisis has surfaced and why it lives on, the least of which is the misdeeds of a government that nurtures a culture of acrimony. Sadly, even its exiled opponents have inherited this unhealthy mentality.



Kourosh Ziabari
New York City

Kourosh Ziabari is a journalist and media studies researcher. A contributor to *New Lines Magazine*, he has earned a master's degree in political journalism from Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. In 2022, he received the Professional Excellence Award from the Foreign Press Correspondents Association. He is also an alumnus of the Senior Journalists Seminar Fellowship by the East-West Center and a 2022 World Press Institute fellow with the University of St. Thomas. He was a finalist for three Kurt Schork Awards in International Journalism in 2020, 2021 and 2022.