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Iran creates “Halal Internet” to control online information

Two news agencies and several information websites have been blocked since 4 September, a week after the official unveiling of the “National Information Network,” also known as “Halal Internet,” while the Centre for Monitoring Organized Crime (a Revolutionary Guard offshoot) has reported the arrest of around 100 Internet users in recent weeks.

The [Mojnews](#) and [Bornews](#) press agencies and at least two other news websites including [Puyesh](#) and [9sobh](#) were blocked on the orders of the [Committee for Determining Content that Constitutes Internet Crime](#), which is headed by prosecutor-general.

They were censored for reposting documents about the Tehran city hall’s sale of city-owned land and apartments to senior officials and municipal council members or reposting criticism of the judicial system’s inconsistency in its attempts to combat corruption. Memarinews.com, the first website to post the documents, was blocked on 29 August.

The first phase of the [National Information Network was formally celebrated on 27 August](#) by several government officials including the first vice-president, the minister of communication and information technology and the secretary-general of the Cyberspace Supreme Council.

However, they restricted their statements to the usual slogans and did not explain how this National Information Network will work and what consequences it will have for Iran’s Internet users, who are officially estimated to number 30 million.

“The accessibility of information will create new business, political and social opportunities and will contribute to the country’s economic development,” First Vice-President Esshagh Jahangiri said, adding that more than 20 billion toman (58 million euros) have been invested in this “great project.”

Communication minister Mahmoud Vaezi said, *“the National Information Network imposes no limits on Internet users”* but this was contradicted by deputy minister Nasrolah Jahangard, who said: *“In the Network, all connections including mobile connections have identification; without identification, you will not be able to use the Network’s services.”*

As well as such propaganda-style statements, the authorities cite the need for protection as justification for the network – protection against cyber-attacks, protection of the country’s sensitive data and the personal data of individual users, and finally protection of Iranian society’s “morality.”

In fact, this National Information Network can be likened to a big Intranet, in which content is controlled and all users are identified, an Intranet that can be completely disconnected from the World Wide Web when the authorities so decide. It is a personal Internet or “Halal Internet” based on “intelligent filtering.”

The speed and bandwidth on this national Intranet may well be higher than those currently available to Iran’s Internet users but they will be used to provide more propaganda, not independently reported news and information or freely gathered data.

RSF points out that Reza Taqipour Anvari, the communication minister during the previous Ahmadinejad administration, already announced the launch of the first phase of a [“National Internet” in July 2011](#). During this first phase, he said the connection speed available to users would initially be 8 Mps and then 20 Mps.

Read: [Government blocks Google and Gmail, while promoting National Internet](#)

For the past year, different sections of the Revolutionary Guards have been announcing the dismantling and systematic arrest of networks of people who act “against society’s moral security,” “modelling criminals” (those who have photos and videos of models) and those who “insult religious beliefs.”

RSF has registered more than 800 cases of this kind since the start of 2016. The Centre for Monitoring Organized Crime, a Revolutionary Guard unit that polices the Internet, announced on 23 August that [“450 individuals responsible](#) for pages on social networks such as Telegram, Whatsapp and Instagram” had been summoned and arrested.

“We do not dispute Iran’s right to crack down on online crimes but the definition of these crimes in Iran’s laws and their enforcement do not conform to international standards including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Iran has signed,” said Reza Moini, the head of RSF’s Iran/Afghanistan desk.

“This policing and censorship is officially supposed to protect the Iranian public from immoral content but in practice it extends to political information about religion and to websites about fundamental rights, including women’s rights.”

Imprisoned software and website designer [Saeed Malekpour](#) is a case in point. He was sentenced to death in 2010 on charges of creating pornographic sites and “insulting Islam’s holy principles” because he created a photo-uploading programme that, unbeknown to him, was used by porn sites. A Canadian resident, he was arrested while visiting his family in Iran in 2008.

The debate about “intelligent filtering” has intensified within the Iranian regime in recent months. The conservative camp, with its legal arm (the judicial system) and its military arm (the Revolutionary Guards), has been pressuring President Hassan Rouhani’s administration to increase the level of Internet control in general and, in particular, to filter Telegram, which is officially reported to have more than 15 million users in Iran.

Although formally banned, apps and social networks such as Telegram, Facebook and Twitter play a major role in the dissemination of content in Iran. Both government ministers and conservatives agree on keeping the pressure on Telegram in order to facilitate access to its servers and use intelligent filtering.

This does not stop Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei from having his own “intelligently filtered” Instagram account.

[Iran is ranked 169th out of 180 countries in RSF’s 2016 World Press Freedom Index.](#)