



**DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN IRAN:
A CONFERENCE IN HONOR OF SIAMAK
POURZAND**

**PANEL 2: INFORMATION, COMMUNICATIONS, AND
MEDIA IN IRAN**

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WELCOME/MODERATOR:

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SPEAKERS:

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Nikahang Kowsar
Political Cartoonist

Mehdi Yahyanejad
Creator
Balatarin

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SUZANNE MALONEY: Good morning. And we have a critical mass back in the room or at least somewhere perched near the television sets out front.

Can you all hear me?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: No.

MS. MALONEY: You can't hear me?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Now we can.

MS. MALONEY: All right, terrific.

[00:00:10]

Well, thank you so much. And I want to extend a special thanks to the family of Siamak Pourzand, to Mehrangiz Kar, to her two daughters, Leily and Azadeh Pourzand, and to her son-in-law Mehrdad Hariri who have spoken this morning. And I will reference a bit of what they said in my introduction to this discussion, which really does follow on the legacy of the life and work of Siamak Pourzand and brings the discussion into some of the contemporary issues that we're – that we're facing today in Iran.

I am deeply honored to be here in tribute to an individual and to his family whose lives and work are really an inspiration, not just to Iranians but all those of us who are outside Iran and care about the country and try to follow and understand the country. And I'm very much honored to be among a group of people sitting here on the stage and also in the audience here who have been directly engaged in carrying on the important dual dimensions – I don't want to talk about two-track policies, but the dual dimensions of the life and legacy of Siamak Pourzand; that is to say both the art and writing and journalism that was his *métier*, but also the long struggle for human rights and democracy that was inherent in everything that he did and all of the work that he produced. So I'm deeply honored to be here.

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We spent nine months trying to pull this conference together. Really in the days after learning of the death of Siamak, we came together and have been trying to come up with a panel that would appropriately honor his work and really find a way to use that to address a set of issues that too often get overshadowed by everything else that the world focuses on with respect to Iran. And I will say that over the course of those nine months, there were a number of times where I thought it just might never happen; we might never be able to find a time where Haleh and Karim and everyone, we're all in the same country at the same time where we would be able to find a room in a – in an institution here in Washington, which is often more complicated than it ought to be. But I could have never imagined that it would come together as phenomenally and successfully as it – as it has today. I think we have just the right array of people to address the set of issue that we hope

to address today, a really brilliant group of panelists over the course of this morning and after lunch, which will follow this panel.

And I think the timing, ironically, has worked out in a very important fashion, which is to say that anywhere that you go in Washington over the course of the past four to six months, there has been only one or two issues on the agenda: One is war; the other is the nuclear issue; that is all that anyone has any space or time to talk about. It is vital that we find a way to tell – to change the subject, not to change the subject from Iran, but to broaden the terms of our understanding of Iran to ensure that the stories of individuals like Siamak Pourzand, the life and work that he embodied – and that of his family, Mehrangiz Kar, who is in and of her herself a well-known advocate for human rights.

[00:03:18]

So I'm just thrilled to be here and thrilled that so many of you are squished together in this small room or standing out front in the overflow area, and I look forward to having a really terrific conversation.

The reality is, you're not here to listen to me; you're here to listen to these three gentlemen, and I'm here to listen and learn from them as well. You have in front of you their bios. They're three really terrific and phenomenal individuals whose work in several different areas is quite important to the – to the issues that we're here to talk about today.

Media, information, technology and journalism: These are very much areas of ferment in Iran for many, many years. Iran has this incredible press tradition which stretches back over the course of at least a century and which has mutated and evolved in ways in response, particularly over the course of the past 15 years, to the incredible repression that has been wrought by this regime. So it's a battleground as well as an area of incredible entrepreneurship.

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And for that reason, we've brought together Mehdi Yahyanejad, whose website, Balatarin, is well-known to anyone who has an interest in Iran and social networking. He is a researcher at the University of Southern California and flew cross-country to be here with us today.

Our second panelist will be Nikahang Kowsar. Again, if you followed writing about Iran, or for that matter, even if you don't read Persian, if you've ever seen a political cartoon with incredible power and incredible relevance, it was almost certainly done by this gentleman. And his website and his continued work and writing on Iran is something that anyone who is interested in understanding the current political dynamics follows.

Our third panelist, Henry Wooster, is here with us as acting deputy assistant secretary of state for Near East policy, focus specifically on Iran. Henry has an incredible background on Iran and is going to speak about some of the real contributions that have been made over the course of the past decade by the U.S. government in trying to reach out to Iranians and trying to ensure that Iranians have access to information and technology.

[00:05:28]

With that, let me turn the discussion over to Mehdi. And we'll speak again for about five to seven minutes. I will not probably be quite as close on the clock as Haleh was, but I will try to enforce some discipline so that we can get to a conversation among all three of these gentlemen and then with all of you who are listening. Thank you.

MEHDI YAHYANEJAD: Thank you.

In the past few months, you might have seen a number of articles in New York Times or in other newspapers that question the importance of Internet in cases of Arab Spring and also in Iran in terms of how important Internet has been in mobilizing people and creating what happened, especially in Arab countries.

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For Iranian government, there is no question that Internet is a – could be disruptive and dangerous for their stability. And what I'm going to do, just summarize some of the things that Iranian government is doing to make sure that its Internet is not going to disrupt their stability and their government.

So in the past few years, the Iranian government has increasingly improved their control of Internet. Iranian government has been active on several fronts. The first is Internet censorship. As early as year 2002, Iranian government started Internet filtering based on domain names and keywords. They have used both imported and also internally developed technologies to confront censorship. Increasingly, they adjust the level of censorship based on the political events of the day. So if there is a demonstration happening or they're expecting a demonstration to happen, they usually try to block access to secure Internet connections. Sometimes they block Gmail, and also they increase the attacks on opposition websites. So it's a – it's a time-based – they adjust their level of control, and they usually expect what's happening and they try to make predictions.

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So the second action they are increasingly involved in is surveillance. And Iranian government has imported technologies and also built technologies to monitor the activities of the activists on the Web and also mobile. For example, for mobile, they have developed software to look for specific keywords in text messages and also identifying individuals who forward these type of message to a number of people, so – a large number of people.

For Internet, they monitor the unencrypted Web traffic. For example, Yahoo! email is unencrypted, and any email sent through Yahoo! mail is visible to Iranian government, and they definitely log the content because that's – we've heard a number of stories from people who have been confronted with the content of their email messages in prison. Activists in prison are regularly forced to confess after they are presented by the content of their communications.

And also another method of surveillance is hacking into computers and email accounts of the activists. Iranian government has become fairly sophisticated in this regard, and most political activists inside and outside Iran underestimate how sophisticated Iranian government is such type of activities. An unsuspecting PowerPoint file containing several funny images or jokes could be in fact something that's been created by Iranian government in order to hack into the email accounts of the activists, and such PowerPoint files could be passed on by just people who are trying to just send a funny joke to their friends by email.

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The third front that Iranian government has been fairly active is content production. They have tried to increase the production of content sympathetic to their cause. This is done partly through the website they have set up. I mean, you know about Fars News, you know about Keyhan – I mean, the news that publishes their propaganda and content and news.

Well, also, they are – they are using what they call cyberofficers. This is separate from cyberarmy; there is a cyberarmy, which is basically a secret group of hackers, and they hack into email accounts and laptops and so on. But these are – cyberofficers are probably less sophisticated technically, but they are people who go on – leave comments on the Web. And they're usually, like, leaving comments about – sympathetic to the Iranian government or sometimes attacking dissidents. They – in some cases, they publish personal information, usually embarrassing to – for those dissidents, and they work in a very coordinated fashion.

In fact, a few months ago, in a – in a very rare public infighting between Iranian government supporters, it was disclosed how much they are paid on hourly basis. And in fact, then, there was some, I mean, a number of other websites who said no, this is not the case; they are – they are working for free, and it's – (inaudible). But it – the source was very credible, and it's believed that the amount was fairly accurate.

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So these – I mean, one of the, in fact, Iranian Revolutionary Guard has claimed that they have trained 15,000 cyberofficers so far. And they are active on the Web. And they have been report of people who have seen such cyberofficers hanging around in cybercafés and working on leaving comments on the Web.

Another area the Iranian government has been recently very active is what they call halal Internet or national Internet. And by that, what they are trying to do is, basically what's happening for postal mail – like, in any country, usually the internal mail goes through the – inside the country. For example, if there is a letter going from Los Angeles to Boston, it's not going to go through Toronto. And in case of Internet, since it's a global network, the traffic doesn't recognize borders, and it goes through borders.

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In case – in this case, Iranian government wants – tries to do – try to – tries to separate the internal communication from the outside communication. And by doing that,

they could allow the speed of Internet, which, in Iran, to go higher, because there will be less technical force to do the surveillance. But they keep this – the speed of Internet connections with the outside country to the same level as it is now, so they will be – they will be able to keep the surveillance as it is for the international communication. So pretty much they are implementing what's done for postal mail, but for Internet, which is kind of, like, counterintuitive, but in their case, it makes sense. And it's partly because of their technical limitation because they don't have enough technical power to do the surveillance that they are doing for – if they increase the speed of Internet. So they want to make sure that they are – they are separating their internal traffic from external traffic and continue their surveillance on their external traffic.

So I stop it here, and we can continue in the Q-and-A. (Applause.)

NIKAHANG KOWSAR: I have to go there.

OK.

This was not an ad for me. (Laughter.) It has been over here all the time. And I'm happy that Karim didn't tell me that the whole thing took nine months. I would have drawn a cartoon of giving birth of a conference. (Laughter.) Thank God he didn't tell me.

Probably you might say what do I mean to be AND not to be? It's to be OR not to be. But in Iran, actually, we, as journalists, are journalists AND activists. And this is something wrong.

So I just want to talk about some things. But before everything, I want to salute Siamak Pourzand and also his lovely family. And just last night, I was going through my cartoons, I remember that the cartoon that actually sent me to Evin – and I had a lot of fun over there – (laughter) – was a cartoon that Siamak was present at the editorial meeting at the Azad newspaper when we were trying to coin a name for the character.

This is was the cartoon. It's famous as “Ustaz Tamsaah” – Professor Crocodile that – from that day that it was published, they know Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi as the crocodile. And I made crocodile so famous in Iran, but Lacoste didn't sponsor me, so – (laughter). No, this is the real crocodile, the original one.

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And one thing – one important thing that all of us are scared of is imprisonment, but we don't usually understand that we are imprisoning the guys in charge of the prison because they have to take care of us in prison, so if we just look at it backwards, we know how to give a hard time to our guards and the judges and – of course, it's not that easy. I'm just probably joking, but if you have been interrogated by somebody like Mortazavi, I – he interrogated me for three and a half hours just because of that crocodile cartoon. And I gave him a hard time. Of course, he gave me six days in Evin, but it was lovely. (Laughter.)

Now many of us have gone to prison for not breaking the law. That's the problem. We did not break the law. We did everything, I should say, between the thin red lines –

between the thin red borders that we had. But it doesn't matter to the government – or, it's not the government, to the judiciary. In Iran, we have censorship and self-censorship. This is the problem that really exists. We have to censor ourselves every day, not because of just what the government might think of our writing or our creations, but even the political parties that possibly are supporting or sponsoring the newspapers that we are working for.

[00:16:47]

That's the big problem that we have. Mr. Toscano was talking about creation and ideology. That's the big problem we have in reformist newspapers that many of us worked for. This is a good example of how the government wants journalists to be – speechless. And the red lines that are actually limiting us are not that thin sometimes. They are – they might crush us.

Now we go to Mr. Rig. (Laughter.) This was published by Washington Post in 2009. I am not free to draw such a cartoon in Iran, but I'm lucky to be out of the country and draw the cartoon and publish it through my syndicate – New York Times syndicate and other places. But the thing is, as long as I'm drawing something against Ahmadinejad, many websites would actually republish the cartoon. But if I criticize the reformist leaders, you will be labeled as a member of the regime.

Sorry, this was published by Toronto Star. It's when Ahmadinejad almost won 63 percent of the vote. And it could be considered a finger. (Laughter.) So he – this gentlemen wins the vote and dances with anybody. And I call this the last tango in Tehran, but I think he has been dancing with others as well. I don't know, with respect to the last tango in Paris, what will happen next.

[00:18:41]

While journalists cannot freely work, citizen journalists have been actually – been creative and passing the information to the world about what is happening in Iran. I drew this in 2009 when the videos of the events on the streets in Tehran were actually broadcast on different TV stations, through the videos people had posted on YouTube. And that was a very important thing that while journalist, Mr. Bahari, was arrested or Nazila Fathi didn't have permission to actually do anything, I think, and she had to leave the country later – citizen journalists were the ones who were carrying out the whole thing.

And if you're a journalist working even out of the country, you might be in a lot of trouble. Many of you might have heard that a journalist working for BBC Persian in London was interrogated through Skype because they had taken her sister hostage. And this was the first time that we noticed this had happened and I'm sure this has been going on and on – that the Iranian government – you know, Iranians, I mean the government agents, are hostage takers. Mr. Limberger's (sp) not here, but he'll be here in the afternoon and he's a very good example.

[00:20:18]

And Iranian regime is the best hostage taking government in the world. They know what to do. And by good I mean, no, the worst. And so even if you're out of the country, they can harass your family members. Two of my family members have been sort of harassed in the past few years. I know it. And you'll be in a lot of pressure. But the problem is, do you bow to pressure? Because if you bow to pressure, the whole thing will continue.

Now, I want to criticize Iranian journalism, in a way. Of course, I'm talking about the minority of journalists – few thousand of them. One thing, you are supposed to be loyal to the citizens. But unfortunately, many of us are loyal to the party leaders or the government. And we have self-censorship here as well. I'll come back to that.

[00:21:18]

And the other thing is we do not verify the news very well. Here, I – the, what's – I've tied the eyes of this guy with a green band. It's – I just want to tell you that many of the green websites are silent to what has happened to Iranian dissidents, to Iranian activists before 2009. Human rights abuse has been there for more than 33 years. But so many people are just trying to emphasize on what has happened after 2009. It sells in the human rights, if you can call, business. It sells.

But no, the problem is if people had been more active against human rights abuse in the past, against the Baha'is, against the political activists, probably we wouldn't have seen what we have seen since 2009. Independence – many of us are not independent. We are possibly related to a political party or a group. And then want to say that, no, we're the victors of – we are independent. No, it doesn't sound right.

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And many of us are not independent monitors of power. We just monitor the ones our publishers want to be monitored. And our first obligation in journalism is – should be to the truth. And truthfully, some – many of us have sometimes lied.

And now the reformists – I just brought this because this cartoon was censored three days ago. I won't mention the website that censored it, you can find out yourself – yourselves. But the thing is I just drew Mr. Khatami going for the 2013 elections. And he has to play by the leader's rules. And just this cartoon was censored. And the answer was – I asked the editor why did you censor it? And she told me, it's not relevant. So what's relevant? Mr. Khatami has been all over the news just because of his – casting his vote in – (inaudible) – about two months ago. And he has been talking about participation in the elections and everything. But it's censored.

[00:23:50]

So finally, one of my very good colleagues, Mr. Safsari is here. He's a good representative of all those journalists who had to leave the country after the 2009 election. And many of us have had to leave the country for – because of the death threats we've received, pressures we've received. Had to go to hospital. And many people like Siamak

Pourzand didn't want to leave, or when they wanted to leave they couldn't. We were the lucky ones.

So see you next time, of course, if you're not crucified, as many journalists have somehow been crucified by the Iranian regime. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

HENRY WOOSTER: Well, I consider it, as a representative of the U.S. government, of course grossly unfair to have to follow someone with a sense of humor. (Laughter.) I'll remember that. It's especially tough to follow a cartoonist and a political one.

[00:25:18]

Thank you, Suzanne. Thank you for inviting me. And to the Pourzand family, I salute Siamak.

Ironically the aspect of U.S.-Iran policy that's least covered by the media is in fact our use of the media and of technology to maintain connections to millions of Iranians. The United States has had diplomatic ties with Iran for about 100 years – or let me correct that – had diplomatic ties with Iran for about a hundred years. We see the past 33-plus years as more of an anomaly. Beyond that we've had a shared history that's much longer.

So here we are now, separated from, depending upon your demographics, about 78 million people, of course not including the regime in that – in that count. The president recently in his Nowruz address said there's no reason for the United States and for Iran to be divided from one another. The secretary has made similar remarks. So how do we maintain this relationship and build on it despite the differences that we've had between our governments and despite now the passing of generations? In large part, the answer is the focus of today's conversation: information, communications, the media.

[00:26:35]

In April 2011 we appointed our first dedicated Persian-language spokesman, Alan Eyre, who by the way regrets that he could not be here today. Through his numerous appearances on television, radio and on online interviews – he's had about – he's had over 60 of them to date – he's reached millions and millions of Iranians. And the United States government has a voice inside Iran. Because of the effect this position has had, the department has worked to make it permanent, to train potential successors for Alan.

We convinced the secretary to address the Iranian people in two interviews in October of 2011, the first time during her tenure. The interviews were viewed by as many as 20 million people inside Iran. And we saw a public dialogue between some of the recognized leaders of the reformist and opposition groups and the diaspora as a result. In addition, the secretary has done video announcements – for a change, for instance, in visa policies for Iranian students; for the launch of the Virtual Embassy Tehran.

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Let me speak about the virtual embassy for a second. In December of last year when we launched it, it was pooh-poohed immediately by the government through official – through official announcements. And of course we watched very carefully to see what sort of hits we were getting, what number of hits and where they were coming from. While we were watching this – and the government in Tehran was making announcements about, it's nothing – we then began to see a spike in terms of the hits that we were getting inside Iran. That lasted about 36 to 48 hours.

Then there was a huge drop-off from inside Iran, but an extraordinary number of hits and a fair bit of exchange and dialogue out of – in Persian out of Nigeria, out of the Bahamas and out of a lot of other curious locations. It's called virtual protocol network, for those of you who are wondering. In other words, if you build it, they will come. If you make the content sufficiently compelling – and by the way, all, as a challenge – they will find the site and they will find a way – they will find a way to it.

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So the idea behind the virtual embassy was to consolidate in one place all of our information about Iran. So if you were interested in a visa – and of course a lot of people are – you could go to one place and you could find that. If you were interested in what in fact is U.S. policy about the nuclear issue, you could find that. And what we didn't want to do was to have people going to disparate sites, to go – to sort of stray voltage, quite literally, all over the Internet. We wanted them to be able to go to one place that was an official United States government place that put the official U.S. position out on our policy.

We've had about 2 million hits now on the site. We've hosted 450,000-plus visitors on it. Our Persian-language social media brand, USAdarFarsi – that has been a success as well. Our Facebook page – mind you, this is the U.S. government, so I would like to say that it's Google, and I had fantastical numbers for you – but mind you, keep the relative standard of measure please – our Facebook page has over 60,000 fans, about half of whom claim to reside inside Iran. Our Twitter feed has over 10,000 followers. And videos subtitled in Persian on our YouTube site have been watched over 600,000 times.

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We've also just launched a site on Google+, and with help from Google the State Department has hosted the first Google hangout. It's a live video chat feature. I didn't know what it was either, as the father of four teenagers. I had to have it explained to me. On this site Alan is answering questions in Persian. He answers questions from Persian journalists, from Persian bloggers, and also when we open it up publicly to anyone coming in, writing in questions in Persian – or for that matter calling them in.

There are very few actual U.S. embassy sites around the world with more fans and followers, despite the additional obstacles and risks that Iranians face in trying to access this site – a mark of their moral courage and of their shrewdness and cleverness. Both the United Kingdom and France have followed our lead, creating “UK for Iranians,” and most recently the French with “La France en Iran” brands.

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So pulling all these efforts together, what's the idea? It's unified around the notion of piercing what we refer to as the electronic curtain. You may have seen – or you may not; I hope you have – our – what we call the animated fact sheet – in other words, a video. This is depicting Iran's censorship at work. You can find it on humanrights.gov, where it's hosted. You can also find it on Virtual Embassy Tehran on our website.

So we're trying to tackle the problem of the electronic curtain in a number of ways. We're helping to train Iranian journalists, civil society activists and others in ways to use the Internet safely. We're continuing to support broadcasting through the Voice of America Persian, through Radio Farda. We've been working with international partners to call more attention to the extent of Iranian government jabble (ph) – sorry, satellite jamming. We've begun to find ways to ensure that our sanctions policy, which is broad, does not impede the ability of Iranians to access Internet software that is distributed by U.S. companies. And here I am thinking of Java, Flash, Skype.

[00:32:14]

This is a real brief overview. It's a – just a sketch of what we have been up to of late in terms of media, communications, social media platforms. This is all driven in our push to get connection with the Iranian people, both to boost morale and also to have access to them and to know what's going on in the country insofar as we can access that.

We're very aware that the majority of Iranians do not get their information through the Internet. So of the 78 million population – and again, numbers differ on this, but I've watched them for a bit – the majority of folks are getting – the base of the pyramid, if you will, are getting their information through broadcast media, primarily through state – not State Department, but Iranian state official media.

Jamming, again, impedes our ability to operate in that environment. We do a lot on it as it is, going around it through circumvention of a variety of means, not just on the Internet. But this remains a challenge for us. We're doing fairly well on the Internet, on social media, but the broadcast remains the next new challenge.

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In a recent speech that Secretary Clinton gave on the pillars of soft power, or soft power, she cited the efforts that we've made to engage Iranians through social media, through the Internet, as one of the examples. This is beyond what we're doing with Iran throughout the Department of State. This is also increasingly 21st-century statecraft.

And I see this more and more with the officers that we get into the Foreign Service and elsewhere in the department. They're younger; they're more adept; it's intuitive for them to operate in this fashion. Older dogs like myself – we've had to learn it at the knees of our teenagers or our younger officers. But it's an intuitive way to operate for increasingly large numbers of the population. We don't have to train them, teach them, have talks with them

about why this is important. They get it. They're already present intellectually. They're already adept at maneuvering there.

[00:34:25]

Again, just a brief sketch at what we're doing and how we're doing it to support democracy, the free flow of information and human rights through these social media tools. Thank you. (Applause.)

MS. MALONEY: Thank you so much to each of you for three really rich and diverse presentations.

[00:34:43]

I am going to abuse the prerogative of sitting up here to ask a couple of questions and then turn it over to all of you, because I know that there's probably a lot of discussion around these very issues.

I want to start with Mehdi, because you were, I think, very humble in your presentation. You talked a lot about what the Iranian government has done to impede access to the Internet and to distract young Iranians and others who might be seeking information and try to deter them through their own content production. You didn't talk about Balatarin, which I know is very well-known to many, many people here. But I want you to talk a little bit about the site, about the contributions that it's made and why it – you're so familiar with some of the efforts of the Iranian government to hack and to impede access, because this is exactly what they've done to your site.

[00:35:33]

So tell us some more about Balatarin and where you're going from there.

MR. YAHYANEJAD: So Balatarin is a social news website. People can submit summary of links, summary of news to the other – that are published on other websites, and other users will talk and comment on the links and postings.

The website itself I started five years ago, and the original intention wasn't anything like necessarily dissident action or anything political per se. And in fact at the beginning most of the postings were cultural or scientific and – but as time went on, just because of the freedom on the site, a lot more political voices and more social issues to become more prominent. And as time went on, in fact, the site moved toward more social and political issues.

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Iranian government started by blocking the website in Iran. Later, in fact, the cyberofficers showed up here back in 2008, trying to overtake the website, and what happened – because the – I mean, of course they were a minority; there was a reaction by the dominant group of users. In 2009 the hacking activities by Cyber Army, which is

operated by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, started. And then came the demonstration in 2009 and Balatarin became a kind of a central place for brainstorming about ideas and what to do next. And in a number of cases, some of their ideas that I first presented in comment sections of Balatarin became things that people actually did and in some cases they worked, in some cases they didn't work.

And it's – and I mean, censorship has got worse, so the – some of the – unfortunately, I think, most of the contributions these days are coming from Iranians who are outside Iran. The website has a lot of readership inside Iran, but still, I think, majority of the content are posted by users outside Iran.

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And since there is a gap between Iranians outside Iran and Iranians inside Iran, it's usually like once the contributions are coming from people outside Iran, there is – Iranians inside Iran don't feel that these are necessarily relevant in some cases. And I mean, Iranians who are in exile or who are outside the country are often – I mean, what they want is in a way more – not necessarily in line – what is practical inside Iran or what's – what can be achievable in – at least in the short term.

One thing I want to add is, I think one – for example, Balatarin has been diverse – diversity of opinions. It's pretty much the – I think that one achievement of Balatarin I think I'm very proud of is that you could pretty much find anything – like every single, like, type of Iranian opinion – Balatarin. And whenever something happens, I definitely know, like I could run this entire conversation in my mind and kind of predict what people are going to say because I've seen so many comments.

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So I mean, you have, like, Iranians supporting the Green Movement; you have Iranians who are very cynical about any change; you have Iranians supporting monarchy, you have Iranians, like, supporting Iranian government, religious versus nonreligious. And I think it was the only place that such a diverse group of Iranians have come together. And when – each time you read Balatarin, you definitely are going to get offended, like it – so most people say, like, when we read Balatarin, it's just like we get offended. I say, like, if you don't get offended, that would be – probably that's when Balatarin has died, like it's a – it's – because the diversity of opinions, there's always something that's going to offend you when you read the website.

And it's – and it's different from Facebook or other social network where you choose your friends, because once you choose your friends, you are exposed to things that are – I mean, you like, because it's coming from your friends. Well, on Balatarin you are exposed to things that everybody's posting and you don't have a choice, and you are reading, everybody else is reading, and that, I think, exposes people to much diverse type of opinions. And that's where the offensiveness comes from.

MS. MALONEY: Let me just pivot from that to ask Nikahang a little bit about the future of journalism in Iran. You spoke about the kind of citizen journalism phenomenon

of 2009, and I think you're of a generation where so many people went into journalism as almost an alternative to political activism. When I would visit Iran in the late 1990s, there were so many young people who were – who were either aspiring journalists or journalists, often the same sort of people, I think, who would have probably been going to Georgetown or SAIS here, looking to have jobs in policy positions or in campaigns.

[00:40:43]

But in Iran, they all gravitated toward journalism, because that was where you could make a difference, that was where you could express your views and really have some influence on the shape of things.

You know, journalism has been forced to change in Iran because of the repression and because so many phenomenal people have been forced to leave. Do you see electronic media as the future? Do you see young people gravitating in different directions? And what does this mean for the – for the fight for transparency and accountability and democracy in Iran?

[00:41:13]

MR. KOWSAR: I can go through our own experience that we've had since 2009, when we launched Khodnevis.org, a citizen journalism platform. That has caused a lot of trouble, of course, in a way, because things have been said on the website that many people don't like.

You know, I was thinking that the middle name of Mehdi would be Mehdi “Offensive” Yahyanejad. (Laughter.) But I think mine would Nik “Insulting” Kowsar – (laughter) – because of what we have on Khodnevis –

Q: (You're the wise guys?).

MR. KOWSAR: Yeah, that's the thing.

One important factor is that many are looking for – looking at alternative media as a basis to start, actually, acting as journalists but volunteer journalists, citizen journalists. The thing is, many have – are actually fed up with what they have seen on the state-run TV or newspapers and, let's say, political websites that are supposed to be news websites but are actually partisan websites. We're trying to think of advocacy journalism replacing partisan journalism. We advocate something, but let's see both sides of the story.

[00:42:34]

Many people in Iran do not like to see both sides of the story, and – like in Iran we have two prominent soccer teams, Persepolis and Esteghlal, and journalists act as, let's say, fans of each of those teams, of course in political means that you're either for the team or against the team. So in Iran many of us are either for this party or cause or against it. So when we write something, when we broadcast something, we just want to write something

that promotes our side and is against the other side. And we don't give the reader a chance to understand what's going on.

I think Internet has given us the power and tools to introduce many Iranians to what has been going on in other countries, like in the States or in Europe; that OK, if – even you're for a cause, you get enough information about the other side, and this can create a conversation. We'll get a lot of nasty comments, as Mehdi was saying, that – I'm of course one of the victims on his website, usually – (laughter) – and sometimes I love it. Sometimes I don't love it. (Laughter.) That is when he gets an email that – Mehdi, watch it – he knows –

MR. YAHYANEJAD: Every three months I get a long email from Nikahang complaining about the comments. (Laughter.)

MR. KOWSAR: He knows that if it goes far – on and on, he'll get a bad cartoon. (Laughter.) That's the thing. I will change the name of Balatarin in a nasty way. He knows what it is. I won't tell you. (Laughter.) Yeah.

[00:44:12]

But the thing is, accountability is a very important thing that many news websites actually lack. And keeping the politicians accountable is very important. We have done something that's a little bit unusual, talking about the executions of the 1980s, about human rights abuse, about things that Baha'is have gone through, and also we have followed a few cases. Some of you might be fed up with this, but like we have followed the footsteps of Mr. Rafsanjani's son and going through what he has gone – by breaking the law – of course we're not truly sure that he is breaking the law – entering Oxford University or the oil contracts in the 1990s and all those things. So we're following everything. So at least we want to keep somebody who is accountable and also vulnerable right now, because he's out of the country. So we're trying to give an example of – you can be a little bit nasty in journalism, in contrast with other very politically correct websites.

[00:45:27]

MS. MALONEY: One quick question to Henry. You're not off the hook here, even though I suspect you need to be off the record. But I want to actually raise something and quote something that Leily Pourzand said this morning in her comments. And it was – it was something that her father said to her before he died, which is that: If I am alive and waiting for justice; if I am not, this is your responsibility. And this is obviously all of our responsibility here today.

I want to ask you to speak just a little bit about what the U.S. government tries to do in terms of advocating on behalf of those, many of whom – many of whom are journalists who've been imprisoned or otherwise harassed in Iran. Many of them are sitting here in this room and have been on either the previous panel or will be on the next panel or are here with us today. Can you just speak a little bit about what it is that the U.S. government does in terms of seeking and waiting for justice?

[00:46:20]

MR. WOOSTER: Sure. On the human rights front, broadly, journalists, yes, but broadly in terms of the justice issue – we have pushed very hard – and I'm happy to report a success because it was a Sisyphean undertaking – to get the U.N.'s first special rapporteur for human rights inside Iran. That was victory number one. Victory number two, of course, in that lane, is enabling that rapporteur to be effective.

I – you know, we've been doing diplomacy – statecraft, if you prefer – with Iran for 30-plus years offshore. This is not new to American diplomacy. It's what we did with the Soviets for a period of years, not 33 and counting, but it's what we did for a period of years by operating from off shore or having to come up with, if you will, creative and imaginative ways to do everything from bring justice to simply communicate on Iran.

[00:47:23]

So the U.N. is one mechanism we've worked with. In the U.N. Human Rights Council this was fought, quite literally, in Geneva almost room to room. It was no Stalingrad – and I don't mean to make that comparison – but it was the diplomatic equivalent of hunting down every single vote and going room to room and battling for it in order to get this person appointed.

He's done some very good work in terms of working with other governments who've been fence-sitters before. In the diplomatic lexicon, they're called members of the NAM, the nonaligned movement. We were delighted to see that several of them who had abstained before from voting on human rights issues with regard to Iran had now, in fact voted. And they voted, in our view, in exactly the right way, which was to hold Iran accountable on a number of human rights issues.

[00:48:18]

So that's one mechanism. Beyond that, of course, we work in terms of supporting with funds and with training a number of other groups who are closer and more proximate to the cause. These are groups who are inside Iran. Civil society activists is the – is the term that we use for them. We train them; we support them. We support them politically in terms of in drawing rooms. We support them from the podium.

We've been told time and again from various people who have been in Evin – I don't know if this was your experience at all, but from people who have been in Evin, particularly the longer-term folks – that it was statements and a continuing pressing by the U.S. government that accounted for at least some degree, if not more – it's hard to tell – but accounted for some degree of the treatment that they got that was better treatment or their release or a reduction in their sentence.

[00:49:17]

The thing was that we kept the spotlight on them, and we kept raising them. We're continuing to do this worldwide. I think a number of governments in far corners of the

globe, far corners from the U.S., were surprised to see planes land and to see U.S. diplomats trot in and talk to them about Iran and not mention sanctions or P-5 plus one or the nuclear file, but instead say, hi, we know you're on the Human Rights Council; we're here to talk to you today about human rights in Iran.

They knew that in these cases, in a number of cases, it took us several days of flying to get there – i.e., it wasn't in Western Europe. But they were key votes that were needed, and we were there, and we were pushing it.

So, in summary, we're activist on this on a number of different fronts – again, in the public, but also diplomatically in things that are not seen in the – in the public arena.

MS. MALONEY: Thank you.

Let me open it up to the audience and continue the conversation for a few more minutes. We'll start – Karim, did you have a question?

[00:50:17]

KARIM SADJADPOUR: Thank you for a wonderful panel. I have a question for Nikahang and for Mehdi, maybe along the lines of what Suzanne asked. But, Mehdi, you were talking about how Iran has this cyberarmy which goes around the Internet posting comments in favor of the regime and attacking dissidents and attacking them in a personal way.

How do you exercise restraint on both of your websites when the site is overtaken by these types of commentators? On one hand you want to foster this culture of democracy and openness; on the other hand you're dealing with, you know, in some cases perhaps official representatives of the state who are out to kind of discredit folks. So how do you reconcile that? How do you manage that?

MR. YAHYANEJAD: It's – since it's really hard to tell who is who and the users are anonymous, it's really hard to say who is – who is a cyberofficer and who is a – who is a – just a – like, another dissident group. In fact, Nikahang is a target of a lot of these anonymous comments. And each time I get an email from him, I usually wait for three days until he gets less angry. And then I write back that you are a public figure; just get used to it.

[00:51:33]

So this is – I mean, we can't do much about it. I mean, that's just par for the game, and people have to get used to it. I mean, some of these attacks are just what public figures are going to get. And if there is going to be a democracy in Iran, these things are not going to stop. And since I can't tell who is who, it's hard to stop such things. But I definitely know it's really annoying. And I have been personally exposed to it, and I know it doesn't feel good. And it makes you really angry when it's persistent over time. And Nikahang knows quite well about such attacks, so.

MR. KOWSAR: We've experienced a lot of DDOS attacks in the past three months. And sometimes even we have it on a daily basis, and we know at what time are we going to receive that attack. So we don't publish anything, let's say, between 9:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. usually, because we know our fans from cyberarmy or any other fans – (laughter) – from Britain actually. We have received a lot of attacks from Britain. That's interesting. I don't know who lives in Britain – Oxford, possibly. (Laughter.)

[00:52:47]

The thing is, in 2010 we published a story, and we'd wrote it was "False News" – based on Fars News, but "False News" – that the cyberarmy has attacked the website of the Mehrabad airport. The officials took it seriously. And one of the deputy ministers said that, oh, these guys of the cyberarmy are our friends and work for the government. Oh, that was the first time that they actually had to say something like that. So we – in a way we forced them to actually confess. It wasn't on Sunday, so it wasn't a Sunday confession, but it was a confession. Good enough.

We use newsletters. We use – many of our members have actually their own Facebook pages; so they publish whatever they publish on our website on their Facebook pages. So the information is actually going all around. We don't have a clear record of, let's say, when a cartoon – when a cartoon is posted on the website and it has, let's say, 5,000 visitors; we don't know really how many times the cartoon has been visited on the Web. And Balatarin is actually one of the best places for us to have the cartoons distributed and being seen, or all the content that we have on the website. And even if – when the website is hacked, there's a summary of an article on Balatarin so people can actually follow up with what we've had.

[00:54:18]

So it's not really easy for the Iranian government and the cyberarmy to bring information down. But it's a struggle, and it's an ongoing struggle. And I don't believe the numbers when they say that half of the Iranian public are actually connected through the Web. I think the best number was 11 percent actually, and that's truthful. OK, people were saying that 30 million Iranians are connected online. No, it's not true. It cannot be true. Let's say 10 million; that's a little bit close to – that's accurate.

So – and people coming on Balatarin and other social or political websites they're no more than like 2 million – probably at most 3 million. And so we have a minority of people online.

So I think there should be an investment not only on Internet connection but also on broadcast, on satellite broadcast, and giving the – people in Iran a chance. But the people active on the Web, like political activists or journalists, must have a chance to actually broadcast whatever they are writing online, on those new satellite channels – but not like the ones that we in L.A.

MS. MALONEY: Great. Can we get a mic right here?

Q: Thank you very much. I'm Benjamin – (inaudible). I have a question for Mr. Wooster.

You spoke about a virtual embassy of – now, the Iranians have an interest section in Washington and they have Iranian representatives here. We have an interest section in Tehran but we have no representatives there.

[00:56:03]

I wonder why that is, since it would give us greater insight into its people, the policies, the society. It would reduce the likelihood of an inadvertent conflict through miscalculation or some other reason – and it – and it would help us, perhaps, with access to U.S. citizens that are imprisoned in Iran. And what is the administration's position in having Americans at the interest section?

MR. WOOSTER: Thank you. Because of the lack of diplomatic relations, we don't have U.S. diplomats in Tehran. And in fact, the Iranians don't have – they do not have Iranian officials here. The U.S. interests section is not staffed by Iranian diplomats; there are no Iranian diplomats in it. So it is on a parallel to the structure we have with the Swiss protecting power in Tehran.

In terms of your points about, would presence on the ground reap down to our benefit in the ways that you outlined – it would. But right now we've got some bigger obstacles that are – that are in the way.

MS. MALONEY: Ambassador Toscano?

[00:57:26]

Q: I just have a comment. I know that what you are – Mehdi and Nik have described can be perceived as problematic, because it opened up the possibility for guys we really don't like to express themselves. But there are two things: first of all, the plurality of voices that you are addressing; and second, the fact that you have to be critical, also, for the side that basically you agree with, let's say.

We are not neutral; I am not neutral. Nobody here, I think is neutral vis-à-vis a repressive regime. And yet, what you do not want is to resemble your adversary. You do not want to censor yourself because you don't like something. You don't want to be so partisan that you distort the reality. I think the best chance for freedom and democracy is not to hide reality, even when reality is unpleasant.

MR. WOOSTER: Thank you.

[00:58:32]

MR. YAHYANEJAD: If I – I want to add one – being neutral, but at the same time – so, I mean, did Balatarin team, all the volunteers who are helping, are helping Balatarin because they want to have – see democracy in Iran. So that's very clear for them. But at the same you want to be neutral for the – running the site and the large – all these different voices to be present. So it's been a – in fact, it's been an ongoing issue to help to balance these things. And what we've learned is, for the site – in fact, I – I've seen it, for example,

like for U.S. government, for Voice of America, they have such issues, or – I mean, any time you have a media that's funded for a partisan reason, but at the same time you want to be – having neutral purpose, you're on to such issues.

So in case of Balatarin, all these – volunteers are working there for a reason. But at the same time, the website needs to be neutral. What we did was, basically we found out what things are – half to be – remain neutral, like the posting of the content, voting system and so on. But at the same, you found areas that we could show which side we are on. And for example the banner of the site, we change it on occasions to show sympathy with democratic movement or human right issues and so on. And that's – the control of the banner is with the team of Balatarin and nobody really can complain that why you – you had such a banner or not.

So it's really important to distinguish which areas you could show your sympathy and you could show your – which side you are on and what areas you need to stay neutral.

[01:00:13]

MR. KOWSAR: One part that we are actually sensitive to is libel. And one discussion that I have with Mehdi is sometimes the comments and the things that are going on – on his website – and because they don't have – it's a – they receive hundreds of links every minute, so it's very hard for them to monitor what's going on. We don't have this problem on our portal. Get probably 20 articles, 30 articles a day, and we have to read them. But they get hundreds; so they're bombarded.

One thing is to control, in a way, what's being posted as comments, because you don't know the person who's posting the comment. And I think there has to be a way to actually monitor the comments being posted, because they might ruin everything sometimes.

We want to play, let's say, by the Guardian's rules, and how people post comments. We want to have a conversation – that the whole thing of creating a website is to create a good conversation. We – you can't bet on everything to be constructive, but at least you want to show some respect for both sides. And also you need to verify some stuff. Like when somebody is attacking a person – on the website – you need documents; you need to verify what's going on. That's a side that we are a little bit too sensitive about, and it's really hard – you can understand, for Mehdi – to verify those things. That's the only limitations that we have.

MS. MALONEY: More questions? I just want to get a show of hands, because we've got about 10 more minutes. Question – I know, Mehrdad –

Let me take two at a time, in two groups, and then get some responses. Mehrdad? And move over here.

[01:02:04]

Q: Thank you. My question goes to Mehdi and Nik, at same time, because you touched on the adversary comments being offensive or sometimes insulting to the – even the opposition groups – which is good in a way to hold them accountable that something good – but at the same time, we are talking about a diaspora society with no mainstream

media, with sometimes no channels – proper channels of communication and perhaps – and under systematic, organized attack by a government which is against the freedom of expression. So to what extent these adversary comments or articles or news could accommodate the efforts by the Islamic regime – or work in the same direction, where the opposition groups or individuals or public figures such as yourself and many others – who have perhaps no – as I said, no mainstream media or proper channels of communications – to defend the act or their actions that they have been criticized for?

So I think my question is, it's different when we look at the United States or any other democratic country where there is mainstream media, of course, on the side – there is Onion and many others who hold even the opposition accountable, where it says the diaspora community, which in a fierce battle with a government who's actively persecute activists and political figures, even outside the country. Thank you.

MS. MALONEY: OK. And just before you respond, let me get one other question, and we'll take that. In the back here?

[01:03:48]

Q: Thank you very much for such a great panel. My name is – (inaudible) – I'm an Elliott School student. My question is for Mr. Wooster, actually, about the social media and the communications initiative you outlined. Where do you see U.S. public diplomacy in terms of just generic speeches and presidential engagement with the Iranian people going? Is it – is it still in the contours of the older notion of the “bully pulpit?” Or is it moving into a new phase, like an umbrella, to encompass all these?

MS. MALONEY: OK. Who would like to start with responses?

MR. YAHYANEJAD: So I'm – there is a – I'll go ahead. So there is a clear template when people want to, like, damage somebody's reputation.

This is – so the template is: You take some facts that are true, mix it with things that are really damaging; mix them up, you put it up.

And what happens is, people who know that person, they – they see the facts and they say, OK, this part is true. And – but these are the other things we didn't – we don't know; and they must be true because there are some fact(s) into this.

[01:04:55]

And this is a clear template. It's used repeatedly by whoever – I mean, whether it's Iranian government or other dissident groups who want to attack somebody else and so on. And they might know the clear formula, but this is what they are doing.

It's very hard to defend against it because once you engage you have to say which part is the fact, which part is not – and sometimes, even, you don't want to disclose the fact; it was something you wanted to keep private. And – especially if it's something personal or related to your family, your sexual life, whatever – it's really sensitive, and people don't want to even engage in it – involve in it. And it's – so – and what – by doing that – people who are doing that attack, in some cases, they want to damage the reputation right away; in some

cases, they want to draw the person to get engaged and disclose the facts that they kept secret before, because that's what they – they want to get the person involved.

So defending against – (inaudible) – is really hard. And in fact, the best defense is to just state – I mean, to decide what your public picture is, repeat it as often as you want – you can – in your blog, in your – I mean, whenever you talk or whatever – and not engage with such attacks. Because the minute you engage, you are verifying some of the facts you kept secret. And also, you try to get into territories that – it's defined by your enemy.

And in cases – for example, I've seen dissidents who really take these things personally. I've – like – in fact, there are a few of them in this room that I know, and they've complained to me about a time, because of the attacks, they received a number of things.

[01:06:46]

And what I see them doing is answering people in those comments sections, trying to deny those accusations. And that's just a mistake because you – the minute you do this, you are giving satisfaction to the attacker. You are verifying some of the facts, and you are also defined by that person.

So it's just – I think the thing is – there isn't much I could do because I don't know which part of the statements are a fact; which ones are not true. So I have to leave them on the side because it's something up to people to decide. It's up to the person who's been attacked – go on, define their image in a positive way and not engage with those individuals.

MR. KOWSAR: On what you said about having articles that are criticizing – I don't call them insulting or even offensive in that way – criticizing different political groups and leaders for not being clear and not being accountable, I think that's important for democracy in Iran. That means when – for instance, let's say there's a conference but you don't have members of the media over there monitoring what's happening and monitoring the conversations. OK – a few questions will be raised. And then, you don't know how a meeting is taking place, and the people over there want to represent themselves as the whole opposition, in a way – OK, there are a lot of questions, because so many members of the opposition were not in that meeting. So just keeping people accountable about what they're doing would I think help democracy in Iran, and free speech, as well. And asking questions is one of the most important things that we have been scared of for generations.

I mean, I think it's time to ask those questions, right now, and to show the Iranian public that it's important to ask. (Audio break.)

MR. WOOSTER: (Audio break) – where's public diplomacy going? OK.

[01:09:05]

There's a recognition – and there has been already for some time – that it's – it's a different world than most of us who've been in the department for a while have grown up with. So we grew up in the era of the controlled message, barely a hair removed from the quill pen. And media, you know, technology has really pushed us; we can't be like that anymore.

So a long story short: It's a much more dynamic environment. It's – there's more accountability; there are – there's a much more agility and fluidity. There is an authority that is delegated down now, in ways that it didn't used to be when I signed up. There's a lot more innovation and, in fact, encouragement to innovate. There is also – and I never thought I would see this day – but a degree of deliberate tolerance of, and in fact encouragement of some amount of chaos, in the sense that you can't control the exponential in electronic growth in the – you know, from phones and Twitters, to Internet, to God knows what number of platforms. But you have to just – you have to enable some of that and let it run.

[01:10:24]

So we obviously are going to, in terms of our public diplomacy and what comes the podium, as this is the official position of the United States government on X. That's going to be controlled in the more traditional ways. But in terms of engagement with people – particularly countries with whom we have no access – Iran, no diplomatic relations – or very difficult access – others – the new media tools are very much encouraged.

MS. MALONEY: I am going to renege on my promise to take another round of questions because I know that you are all probably eagerly awaiting the next step in our program, which is a brief moment to grab lunch before our third and final panel beings.

[01:11:09]

I want to just say a word of thanks, because I think what we heard in this discussion was a really, really important and interesting building on the – the first conversation, and leading toward what I think is going to be a great finale. You know, the difficulties and the progress that the U.S. government has made in trying to communicate with a country that we have no direct means of diplomatic interface – and the new challenges that are brought about in a world of, you know, this fascinating conversation, this incredible – incredibly active and engaged Iranian political debate, and the opportunities as well as the challenges that technology creates for that conversation.

So I really want to thank the panelists so much, and it has been just an honor to be part of this conversations. Thank you.

MR: KOWSAR: Thank you.

MS. MALONEY: Thank you. (Applause.)

(END)