

Covering Iran: the role of conventional and non-conventional media



Conference report by

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SOAS

June 16, 2010

Introduction

‘It’s been a tumultuous year for Iran,’ said Professor Annabelle Sreberny, welcoming everyone to the conference. ‘The build-up to the elections in June 2009 was huge... while the result was widely rejected, producing... massive street demonstrations, the like of which haven’t been seen in Iran since the 1979 revolution, and a violent backlash from the Islamic Republic.’

The effect on the media was profound: Iranian print titles were closed and, as visas gradually ran out, the international media was forced to leave the scene. Journalists faced arrest and imprisonment – Reporters sans Frontières estimates that 80 fled the country and 39 are behind bars. New, more imaginative ways of covering Iran were developed, said Prof Sreberny: ‘The younger generation, especially, became street journalists, providing information, still images and video of what was unfolding on the streets, in the universities and elsewhere.’

The conference, she added, would focus on three main areas, concentrating on broadcast media: how the global media coped with the flurry of citizen-produced material, how Iranians found novel ways of covering stories and how the Islamic Republic itself framed the story. She said that efforts had been made to ensure a range of opinions although, unfortunately, no one from IRIB picked up the invitation, and some speakers encountered practical problems and had to be replaced. Prof Sreberny thanked the chairs, the sponsors and the London Middle East Institute, especially Louise Hosking, for their work in organising the conference.

Journalistic practices inside and outside Iran

The media in Iran: an overview

Thirty-one years have passed since the Iranian Revolution, and yet, for many, Iran and the Iranian state are something of an enigma, full of contradictions, said Dr Gholam Khiabany, who opened the conference with a talk on the Iranian media and its relationship to the state. For example, the state claims to be ‘Islamic’, yet the influence of democratic polity is evident in many ways, such as in the idea of a parliament and presidency, the separation of powers and in the subjection of executive and legislative estates to periodical elections. The regime also claims to be committed to the poor and dispossessed, yet the gap between rich and poor has rapidly increased over the years. And the state has overseen the explosive growth of domestic media – despite often being regarded as its number-one enemy.

‘If you look at... [the] statistics,’ said Dr Khiabany, ‘you can see that the Iranian communications industry in the past two decades or so has emerged as one of the most rapidly growing economic sectors in Iran.’ During the first 13 years after the revolution, 3,000 titles emerged in Iran, compared to around 4,000 between 1925 and 1979. The number of television channels grew from two in 1979 to six recently, supplemented by a number of international channels and radio programmes in more than 20 languages, as well as Iranian satellite stations broadcasting from outside Iran. On the telecommunications front, while less than one million had access to a telephone in 1979, this figure had reached over eight million by 1997 and 23 million by 2007. Mobile phone usage, of course, saw an even steeper increase: 135,219 had access to mobile phones in 1997, 2.5 million in 2003 and over 21 million in 2007. In addition, Iran registered one of the sharpest increases in internet access in the region, with figures of around 2,000 in 1996 and over 12 million in 2007. And it has been

estimated that 700,000 of these users are bloggers, securing Persian's position as one of the top 10 languages for bloggers in the world. Nonetheless, Mahmood Enayat later pointed out that the internet in Iran is still expensive and mostly the preserve of the middle and upper-middle classes. Moreover, he said that the 30 per cent penetration figure that has been supplied by the government represents the projected, rather than actual, internet use, which is likely to be much less.

In this process of rapid media expansion, continued Dr Khiabany, the Iranian state has emerged as one of the key and dominant players and has been criticised by human rights groups like Reporters Sans Frontières for using its privileged position to serve its own interests. For example, it has ensured a state monopoly on broadcast media, including the main player IRIB, which is under the direct control of the supreme leader. Newspapers, which had become the preferred medium for disgruntled ex-ministers or officials, have been increasingly targeted in recent years. Thus, paradoxically, the state has assumed both the role of the 'main facilitator of media development' and that of the 'main enemy of the media'.

Despite restrictions, the media environment 'has remained – certainly in the case of the newspaper market – one of the most vibrant and dynamic in the region', said Dr Khiabany. 'In terms of the disputes, the debates and the tensions, and so forth, certainly in the last three decades, I don't think we've seen anything like it in the region.' There are two major reasons for this diversity, he said. First, the broad alliances that brought down the Shah consisted of groups – such as the women's and students' movements – that are still struggling for what they fought for in 1979. The other reason is derived from the very nature of Shi'ism: 'This is a religion in which the difference sources of emulation have been recognised and maintained and there has been a very interesting diversity in terms of perspectives and political positions within that structure,' he said.

How the Western media framed the story

'I want to point out that I respect journalism,' said Professor William O Beeman, introducing his talk on Western media portrayals of Iran. 'Most journalists are very principled. But there is a tendency when you don't have information to fall back on conventional wisdom, [which] is largely dominated by mythological thinking.' Covering Iran in the West is a case in point, he said, especially in the United States, where there is a paucity of expertise on Iran. 'For instance, Ken Pollack (the former CIA analyst and author of *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America*)... styles himself as an Iranian expert but does not speak Persian, has never been to Iran and works entirely from secondary sources.' Prof Beeman's comments were later backed up by Kelly Golnoush Niknejad, who criticised American 'supercorrespondents' who 'don't speak a word of Farsi or Arabic' and 'roam the Middle East and North Africa, [reporting] for the most powerful news organisations', enabling them to set the news agenda.

Why the media interest in supporting myths? First, said Prof Beeman, this ensures journalists access to those who hold the levers of power. Second, it is difficult to contradict these mythologies once public belief is widespread. Third, good versus evil always sells – 'if it bleeds, it leads'. And, of course, 'hard truths' are often too boring or complicated to interest a wide readership.

Prof Beeman gave an overview of the mythologies that have developed in the Western media since the fall of the Shah up to the Bush era and beyond, from the notion from 1979 onwards that Iran is unalterably opposed to the West, to the conviction in the 1990s that Iran is the chief state sponsor of terrorism (replacing Libya, which had that honour in the 1980s), to the belief from 2003 that Iran poses a nuclear danger to the world.

‘What’s missing in the mythology is strong statements about Iran’s human rights record,’ he said. Why? ‘The United States has a very poor human rights record itself, so it can be accused of hypocrisy... And quite frankly, Iran’s human rights record largely only affects Iranians.’ This lacuna in the coverage was later reiterated by Saeed Valadbaygee, who attacked the mass media for failing to reflect minority voices in Iran, such as homosexuals and Bahá’ís, who have had an instrumental role in the street movement. ‘I would like to take this opportunity,’ he said, ‘to appeal to the outlets... to reflect what is happening... in an original and honest way, rather than always trying to be first to the story.’

Prof Beeman said that several techniques enable the media to maintain these mythologies without resorting to the facts. One is to hide behind the editorial voice. For example, on March 22, 2003, the *New York Times* ran an unattributed editorial that began: ‘Iraq, mercifully, still has a few hurdles to overcome in its nuclear weapons program. Iran, its larger neighbor to the east, is almost there.’ And yet, said Prof Beeman, ‘no one anywhere, any time, ever, has demonstrated that Iran actually has a nuclear weapons programme’. Two other popular techniques, he said, are the use of ‘weasel words’ and ‘headline disconnect’, as demonstrated by another *New York Times* article headlined ‘U.S. Says Iran Could (weasel word!) Expedite Nuclear Bomb’ (September 9, 2009). Knowing that many people merely scan the headlines when browsing their newspaper, the editor created a headline that is far more sensational than statements in the article itself, such as ‘[b]ut new intelligence reports delivered to the White House say that the country has deliberately stopped short of the critical last steps to make a bomb’. Another commonly used technique is the quoting of anonymous sources, a ploy Prof Beeman detected at work in the front-page splash of the *Guardian* on May 22, 2007 (‘US fears Iran offensive in Iraq’), which quotes a worried US official saying that ‘Iran is fighting a proxy war in Iraq’ – despite having ‘no real basis for making that statement’, said the professor.

An audience member took issue with this last point: ‘As journalists we know that to corroborate our stories, sometimes we have to protect our sources, he said. ‘[So] if something is unattributed, that doesn’t mean it is not corroborated.’ Prof Beeman agreed, but criticised news stories that consist entirely of unattributed sources.

‘One may say that all journalism to some extent embodies these techniques,’ he said, concluding his lecture. ‘Journalism is an art: it involves swift conclusions about facts that are not always able to be researched in great detail. However, in the case of strong mythological beliefs... language and discourse strategies of the kind mentioned here are more tolerated by editors and the public. This is particularly true today in the case of Iran.’

Experiences of broadcasting to and from Iran: obstacles and opportunities

‘I’m an Iranophile,’ said Jon Snow, ‘I love Iran, I love Iranians – but this is a very troubled love affair, much more complex than any woman.’ He explained that the regime’s erratic attitude towards journalists meant that ‘you never knew whether you’d be kissed or hit’.

For example, bizarrely, Mr Snow and his crew were banned from filming a failed rescue attempt by the United States during the Iran Hostage Crisis (1979-81) near Tabas, Yazd Province. They managed to film the event by simply arriving at the site in the hope that they would be mistaken for an official delegation, and the disaster that ensued provided them with footage that later led the Iranian news ‘like never before’ and discredited the American version of events. ‘What had actually happened,’ he said, ‘was that the C-130 that had come in to refuel the eight helicopters that were on the ground had created through the reverse thrust of the propellers... a kind of dust storm, and the pilots had lost their visual connection

with what was going on and crashed into the end helicopter, setting it on fire. And because the helicopters had broken military regulations and parked too close to each other, one caught the next, [then] caught the next, incinerating the pilots, the crews and all the people on the ground... It was a complete catastrophe.'

Transporting the film cans – which included precious footage of Ayatollah Khalkhali, then minister of justice, whirling the thigh bone of a dead American serviceman above his head – back to Tehran was a considerable challenge because Revolutionary Guards manned roadblocks all the way back. But Mr Snow and his two colleagues found an imaginative solution: 'What we did was to put the large film cans in our underpants,' he said. 'We looked extraordinarily well-endowed – we each had 400 feet of Kodak 440 ektachrome sound-on-mag film undeveloped in our underpants... In those days, the decorum of the Revolutionary Guards was really rather polite... and so we got through with our film.'

Twenty-nine years later, covering the Iranian elections confronted Elizabeth Palmer with similar logistical problems. 'I was the reporter on the ground, struggling to uphold the old standards – which are fairness and accuracy and balance – under tremendously difficult conditions,' she said. 'There were technical problems... problems of access – we were physically threatened. It was a relief to discover at my age that I can still outrun riot police.'

Mr Snow's 'troubled love' of Iran was later mentioned by Masoumeh ('Masih') Alinejad, who gave a talk on the constraints on Iranian journalists. 'For a foreign journalist, that predicament cannot be compared to the challenge that is presented to the Iranian journalist who has, among other things, a proprietorial sense of the country and of the media and the context in which they work.' She continued: 'Domestic journalists have been deprived of the pleasure and privilege of having an interview with [President Ahmadinejad], while he has extended the invitation to every foreign journalist that would entertain the idea of projecting that smile, in every medium possible.' This asymmetry she considered a propaganda tactic 'to project [the government's] image as far abroad as it can... an alternative image to the one that would otherwise be reported'.

Iranian journalists currently work under restrictive conditions: Jamileh Kadivar, the Editor-in-Chief of *Jaras*, said that since the 2009 elections, security forces have monitored newspapers fiercely, sometimes even physically appearing in newsrooms to oversee content. This led most prominently to *Etemad Melli* printing a blank front page in protest. It was in the context of such constraints that *Jaras*, a multi-platformed Iranian media outlet with online, radio and television services, was set up: 'The cutting off of links to the outside world, the huge reduction in internet speeds and the closing down or filtering of many sites meant that there was a need for something that would be a trustworthy source because in the vacuum that was created, government-based or government-supporting agencies were filling the gap.' *Jaras*, continued Mrs Kadivar, is 'close to the Green Movement' yet 'not a political party' and has 'no political ambitions'. Dependent only on Iranian money, *Jaras* can claim independence, she said. 'It is there to counter extremism, and its priorities are for and towards the people of Iran, most particularly those that find themselves within Iran.'

But Ms Alinejad said that today, many Iranian journalists actually feel more able to conduct their work without fear of questioning or imprisonment – the problem is that their interview subjects are being targeted instead, prompting self-censorship by concerned journalists. She gave the example of her interview with the Nourizad family for *Jaras*, which led to the summoning of the wife and daughter by the authorities. 'This, in turn, creates a more conservative climate in which journalists are having to withhold their full energies because they are concerned about the safety and security of their subjects.' This anxiety was also raised by Ms Palmer of CBS News, who spoke of her concerns for the security of those she filmed inside Iran during the 2009 election crisis.

Restrictions on domestic media have allowed a space for transnational broadcasting to Iran to flourish, employing hundreds of Iranian journalists worldwide. Radio Farda, the only 24/7 radio station broadcasting to Iran, is a case in point, and was the subject of heated discussion at the conference. Sharan Tabari of Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, of which Radio Farda is part, said that Iranians can trust Radio Farda to be balanced and impartial, and claimed that the service currently has the largest broadcast audience in Iran, along with two television stations. She said that the service ‘commits itself to the highest standards of professional journalism’, and read out an internal circular from the chief editor dated June 9, 2010, reminding colleagues to maintain neutrality as the anniversary of the elections approached. It said: ‘Please make sure that in your reports you do not use adjectives or phrases like “people’s freedom-seeking movement” or “legitimate movement” or any other phrase or sentence that could be considered judgmental.’

Yet Afshin Rattansi was not convinced by Ms Tabari’s claims, citing Radio Farda’s US funding as proof of its partiality. ‘The old maxim that journalism is speaking truth to power is very important to always hold in mind,’ he said, ‘and at the moment, we live in a world with arguably one hegemonic power that is the United States, and Radio Farda is directly funded by that superpower... I think we have to take that in before we listen to journalistic principles from an organisation that Donald Rumsfeld said that he wanted to put so much more money into when events in Iran took a turn.’

However, Ms Tabari insisted that Radio Farda is ‘completely impartial and unbiased’, and said that it has even been criticised in the United States for not sufficiently representing the American perspective. ‘We are not taking orders from anyone,’ she said, before being interrupted by Mr Rattansi: ‘No one *needs* to order you!’ In a newsroom, he argued, one enters a ‘dimension’ where ‘no one needs to tell any journalist to be censored’, or how to select a story or identify a running order. ‘I reject the idea of impartial journalism anyway,’ continued Mr Rattansi. ‘I think that journalists, when they enter the craft – I don’t call it a profession – should embrace their partiality and understand it when they look at stories because that’s the only way they’re going to understand their own individual prejudices.’

He praised Press TV, the English-language television channel of the Islamic Republic, for its ‘level of coverage of dissent, of speaking truth to power, that no other English language international channel provides’, and claimed that it broadcast voices that ‘you won’t here on the BBC and corporate media’, such as Noam Chomsky and Gore Vidal. He said that he felt freer there than at the BBC, where he was a producer for Radio 4’s *Today* programme: ‘I realised that the stories that I wasn’t able to cover at the BBC when it came to the developing world I could [at Press TV].’ He admitted, however, that the station’s coverage of the developing world was ‘not without its faults’. Also, when questioned by an audience member about the ongoing Ofcom investigation into Press TV over its interview with the journalist Maziar Bahari while he was in custody at Evin Prison, Rattansi said: ‘I deplore the actions of the journalists involved in that... I deplore all human rights abuses and... await the outcome of that Ofcom enquiry with interest.’

The rise of citizen media in Iran

Citizen media during the 2009 election crisis: an overview

In the aftermath of the 2009 elections, aware of the restrictions on professional reporters, ordinary Iranians sent eye-witness accounts, still photographs, videos (by both professional cameras and handheld mobile phones), e-mails, ‘tweets’ via Twitter and SMS and Facebook

messages to worldwide media outlets, such as BBC Persian Television. According to Pooneh Ghoddousi of BBCPTV, Iranians risked their lives on many occasions to send them user-generated content (UGC), and many were persecuted afterwards or left the country. 'It was a matter of people really feeling the responsibility on their own behalf to get this information out and told and viewed by the rest of the world,' she said. Similarly, according to Ms Tabari, Radio Farda was 'flooded' with hundreds of reports, messages, pictures, films and stories each day. Every one of her colleagues began to receive information on their e-mail, Twitter and Facebook accounts.

One of these social media tools, Twitter, attracted particular attention in the West for its use among Iranians during the crisis, which led to the phrase 'Twitter revolution' creeping into wide usage. However, Mr Enayat said that the idea that Twitter performed a significant mobilising role in Iran was 'one of the greatest myths that was created [surrounding Iran]'. He pointed to a study called *The Iranian Election on Twitter: the first eighteen days* by the Web Ecology Project (June 26, 2009), which looked at the Iran election hashtag and found that most of the tweets were in English rather than Persian. Moreover, of the English hashtags, 59.3 per cent only tweeted once and 10 per cent of the users produced 65.5 per cent of total tweets. Similarly, he said that Facebook, which was blocked in Iran just before the election, 'played a role in terms of organising the Iranians outside in more of a solidarity movement, rather than just organising protests inside Iran'.

This prompted Professor Scott Lucas to urge everyone: 'Can we please kill off the term "Twitter revolution"?... Almost no one I know and respect who covered these events last summer felt that Twitter was causing a revolution.' However, Ms Niknejad understood the phrase differently: 'The Twitter new media revolution, not that Twitter *caused* a revolution in Iran.' She went on to describe how a tweet she had posted criticising CNN for its reporting of the election crisis had been picked up by the *New York Times*, which led CNN to ask her to come on as a commentator, which transformed her Tehran Bureau website into 'the focal point of what the non-Farsi-speaking media was picking up'. As a result, the website was hacked, so she turned to Twitter instead, picking up followers by the second and gradually recognising her tweets in traditional media and websites worldwide. 'If that's not revolutionary, I don't know what is,' she said. Mr Enayat clarified that he was not disputing Twitter's reporting role, just its use as a vehicle for social movements.

The Iranian blogosphere is also often seen as a domain of dissent from reformist opponents of the regime, but Dr John Kelly revealed it to be a much more heterogeneous forum. He related the findings of a research project he directed in collaboration with the Berkman Center at Harvard University that analysed the structure of the Iranian blogosphere, starting with the premise that bloggers link to web pages containing information they care about. Dr Kelly presented diagrams depicting Iranian bloggers as dots in spheres that represented the Iranian blogosphere. The larger the dot, the greater the number of other bloggers linking to that blogger. The closer the dot is to another dot, the more densely interconnected those blogs are, either directly or through their network neighbours. The blogs are then categorised into 'attentive clusters', represented by colours, because their linking histories with other web pages – such as YouTube videos, news stories, NGO websites and so on – are similar.

Dr Kelly said that by tracking blogging behaviour over about six months, the researchers were able to formulate several categories of blogger that emerged from these clusters: reformist politics, secular / expatriate, poetry bloggers, conservative politics, religious youth, 'cyber Shias' and mixed networks. The findings contradict the commonly held belief that the Iranian blogosphere consists of mostly young democrats opposed to the regime: only the reformist politics and secular / expatriate clusters strictly conformed to this

description, and they represented just one – albeit significant – corner of the diagram. The researchers were surprised to find that poetry blogging, for instance, forms one of the largest structures of the Iranian blogosphere. They also found that conservative and religious blogging activity has been underestimated, the two most important sub-groups of which are the conservative politics bloggers and the cyber Shias. The former, who represent Ahmadinejad supporters or those of other conservative figures in the establishment, are ‘very news-attentive’ and write about ‘hard politics’, while the latter are ‘deeply involved in an internal Shia theological debate’. While the pro-government parts of the sphere tended to link to sites like leader.ir and Basiji, the secular / reformist bloggers were more inclined to the BBC, Radio Farda, Fars News, YouTube and fa.wikipedia.

Other features of the blogosphere were also analysed. For example, the researchers found that the vast majority of oppositional bloggers were not being filtered, though it was mainly secular / reformist bloggers who were targeted. Most bloggers were based in Iran, and many were young. The blogosphere was comparatively gender-equal, with more women, unsurprisingly, participating in the secular / reform areas.

Another unexpected finding was that conservative politics bloggers were more likely to blog anonymously than secular / reform ones. ‘The reason the conservative bloggers don’t use their real names has nothing to do with worrying about ending up in Evin prison,’ explained Dr Kelly, ‘it’s because there’s a kind of cultural norm against taking credit for your ideas from an Islamic point of view – it’s a kind of modesty issue.’ An audience member wondered if the real reason for anonymity among conservative bloggers was that they were ‘fake’ – from *mullahs*’ sons, for instance. Dr Kelly responded: ‘What makes a *mullah*’s son’s opinion not count?’ The audience member distinguished expressing a personal opinion freely from being paid by the government to do so. Dr Kelly said that his team had used effective techniques to expose instrumental or coordinated behaviour: ‘Whenever you have coordinated online campaigns, you end up with a lot of regularity because everybody’s referencing some set of talking points... They pop out of the analysis – like that.’ He added: ‘We did see a little bit of that on the conservative side – but very, very small.’

The researchers were also able to analyse changes in the blogosphere over time. From 2008 to 2009, they noticed that the conservative and Islam-oriented parts of the blogosphere were growing in activity and importance in advance of the election, and found that the blogosphere was not disrupted in the aftermath of the election, continuing to produce 5,000-7,000 posts a day.

In terms of content, the researchers found that there was a lot of expected opposition to the government from the secular / reformist bloggers and expected support from the conservative politics bloggers, but that ‘even among those conservative bloggers there is a lot of criticism of Ahmadinejad and other parts of the regime’. Dr Kelly continued: ‘They talk about the mistakes of the Iranian regime, they denounce the government’s corruption and they question the accuracy of government facts and statistics. So the conservative bloggers in Iran are not pushovers who are just toeing the line, and they do not all support Ahmadinejad by any stretch.’

Covering Iran: the advantages and disadvantages of citizen media

Prof Scott Lucas roundly defended the value of social media as a humanising, localising medium. ‘There is no privileged media in this crisis,’ he said. ‘There is no privileged politician in this crisis; there is no privileged government in this crisis. Tear down the gates in terms of any type of definition of what information is preferable to another.’ Prof Lucas’ US politics and international affairs blog, *Enduring America* (soon to be *EA World View*), has

provided a 'LiveBlog' on Iranian developments every day since June 13, 2009, making extensive use of social media networks for its information. He argued that the crisis is 'predominantly an Iranian story being pursued by Iranians – and it should be respected as such'. Social media can open up the playing field for ordinary people to participate. Moreover, citizen journalism can help to shift the narrative to one of 'rights, justice and demands for fairness, demands to have a voice', rather than one focused on Iran's alleged nuclear weapons programme.

Other speakers defended social media's reporting role. Mr Enayat said: 'Conventional, traditional media relied on citizen journalism to fulfil its role as a broadcaster, as a news provider.' CNN even appointed a Twitter correspondent two months before the election. Social media, he said, act as an important 'bridge' between ordinary Iranians and traditional media outlets, via diaspora Iranians with their knowledge of context and language. His comments were backed up by Ms Palmer of CBS News. 'We spent so much time and money vetting the pictures that were coming in... because they were necessary to our reporting,' she said. 'We couldn't be everywhere, [yet] the story was happening everywhere. And certainly in order to tell what was going on outside Tehran it was necessary for us to use video that then had to be painstakingly checked.' She said that traditional media should regard social media as a resource, rather than a threat. Covering the election crisis highlighted, for her, 'how important it is... to take advantage of the extreme power of social networking and so-called "citizen journalism" without compromising what, increasingly, I think people will look to mainstream media for – and that is a validation stamp, an imprimatur, that if it's here and we say it's true, it is because it is true.'

This prompted an audience member to point out that 'the mainstream media and the ones with the titles aren't necessarily the purveyors of all truth', citing as an example the quoting of Ahmadinejad as saying he would wipe Israel off the map. Ms Palmer responded: 'All I was trying to say was, ultimately, new and old media that try and uphold the old journalistic virtues of balance and fairness and accuracy will become known for that. And in this increasingly cacophonous world, that will acquire perhaps even more value than it did before.'

Her remarks echoed those of Ms Tabari earlier in the day, who acknowledged the value of UGC while insisting on an important role for professional journalism: 'To [Radio] Farda, citizen journalism can only be seen as a source of valuable information, not a journalistic product... journalism is a profession that merits certain skills, education and experience – no matter how highly educated a citizen is in other fields, he or she cannot become a journalist instantaneously and without proper qualifications... it is the job of professional journalists to verify the accuracy and the value of information.'

The problem of verifying UGC was a topic of extended discussion throughout the day. Several of the speakers highlighted the enormity of the task and the substantial resources it demands of a media organisation. Ms Ghoddousi said that BBC Persian Television was 'inundated' with UGC during the crisis but did not, at the time, have enough staff who were trained in verifying the footage and images – a problem they quickly had to rectify. Radio Farda, said Ms Tabari, had to appoint a team and editor who were familiar with the geography and logistics of Tehran and other cities to corroborate the information received. At CBS News, said Ms Palmer, this was the job of 'an extensive network of people' in London. 'It was a Herculean task,' she said, 'to try and figure out how genuine [the material] was and where it had been shot and exactly what it represented because... often a little snippet of video doesn't really tell the whole truth about context.' She added: 'I can't tell you that the checking was as rigorous as it would have been in easier circumstances, but we did do our best.'

Ms Tabari provided an insight into the painstaking checking processes in question by relating the account of a Radio Farda colleague in Prague, who said: ‘Less than a week after the election, plainclothes agents attacked students on a university campus in Tehran. We received the news from Iran in the early hours of the morning but had no other source to verify it nor could we find anyone on site to give us a reliable witness account of what was happening... Around five in the morning, I received a few films that were showing the clashes. I rang someone in Iran who I knew at the campus. I described the scene in the film step by step until I was satisfied that it was authentic. Only then I prepared a report on the attack.’

Such diligence is justified by the occasional exposure of hoax material. ‘I remember one evening,’ said Ms Palmer, ‘when we were sent... on the 19th (June) a piece of video that went viral on the internet of young people being thrown off a bridge with their hands tied behind their backs... and we got a call – I think it was from someone who claimed to be from the Iranian resistance, from the Mujahedeen Khalgh– saying that this happened near Vanak Square... One of our video editors immediately said: “I think that can’t be true – I’m pretty sure those images are at least two years old.” And he did a visual archive search and, in fact, they were images that came out of Iraq... when the Kurds were being persecuted.’

Prof Lucas pointed out that this process of source corroboration is hardly new to journalism. ‘I used to be a journalist,’ he said, ‘and there were times when I took sources who were on the other end of a phone line. And there were times when I talked to someone who I had not met before who gave me information. And what you have to do is judge not only the first report, but the second, and the third and the fourth. Does it correspond with other news that you get? So I do not make a distinction between the sources that are used by CNN... we make our own judgments on sources.’

Nonetheless, a particular problem arising from the UGC produced by the Iranian election crisis, aside from its sheer volume, was that much of it was vivid, traumatic images or footage, all of which had to be trawled through carefully, sometimes for hours at a time. Ms Ghoddousi said that even after very rigorous training, ‘it was still very difficult to keep your emotions down and keep strong and keep unbiased and keep the impartiality in check... Remaining even-handed, remaining truthful, and evaluating and rigorously filtering everything that we received... while keeping [control of] our emotions was a very trying time.’

While much of the discussion focused on the value of citizen media to traditional journalism, Saeed Valadbaygee gave an insight into how the Green Movement depended on media organisations to ensure its message reached a wide audience. For example, *Street Journalist*, the news website of which Mr Valadbaygee is editor, devoted itself to live, bilingual reports from street protests, with the help of both citizen and professional journalists, and managed to attract around 14 million readers by ‘*Ashura*. He explained the motive behind the website: ‘We wish to inform the people about the inhumane acts that are perpetrated against the people of Iran on the streets of Tehran and other places inside Iran today.’ *Street Journalist*, he continued, made it possible ‘to give coverage minute by minute, second by second, blow by blow of all the things that were going on at street level, despite the heavy security interference’. It also allowed people from all over the world to engage with the cause. ‘A man in the jungles of the Amazon took responsibility for uploading our video files,’ he said, ‘a Japanese lady did the same [and] people in Italy and Australia were learning Farsi in order to engage with us still more.’ As Mr Enayat said later in the day, social and conventional media need each other in order to function – it is a two-way process. He gave the example of the Iranian journalist Hanif Mazrooie, who while editor of *Norooz News*, discovered an unknown mass grave in Behesht-e-Zahra Cemetery in Tehran, which he

discussed live on BBCPTV. Without conventional media, said Mr Enayat, ‘that news would never have made it anywhere’.

Nonetheless, he warned people against overestimating the extent to which the internet is truly a ‘free space’ in Iran today, and advised Green activists to follow the supporters of the 1979 revolution by embracing ‘small media’ – which today means Bluetooth, DVDs, e-mail and so on. Mr Enayat, who was speaking in his capacity as a PhD student at the University of Oxford, said that the Iranian government has devoted considerable resources to countering the ‘soft war’ since the June elections. One strategy was to bring down opposition websites through distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks; that is, putting an excessive level of traffic on a website so that it cannot cope. He presented a graph from the *Norooz News* website, one of the oldest reformist websites, which showed that the level of attacks was particularly high just before key dates in Iran. In addition, reports circulated that arrested activists had been presented with copies of their e-mails to other activists, generating a fear, encouraged by the authorities, that all e-mails and SMS messages were being monitored and prompting self-censorship among ordinary internet users in Iran. And on the blogging front, the popular platforms WordPress and Google’s Blogger were filtered, ensuring that thousands of Persian blogs would be blocked. According to Mr Enayat, the government is trying to push bloggers towards internal blogging providers, such as Blogfa and Persian Blog, because by law those platforms have responsibility for blog content. ‘That’s another new method of control – to outsource or put responsibility for control on the private sector,’ he said. Filtering is an effective method, he continued, because it reduces website traffic by about 60 to 70 per cent, and any solutions that internet users develop are only temporary.

Another strategy was to jam satellite broadcasting, such as BBC Persian Television. ‘Since the 12th of June, we have been jammed with rigorous pressure from inside Iran with varying enthusiasm levels at different points of time,’ said Ms Ghoddousi. However, she said that solutions are being sought: ‘The BBC has... tried to address the jamming on international grounds and legal grounds, broadcasting unions and institutions, and now we are also broadcasting on several new frequencies.’ Moreover, the new generation of Iranians has proven very apt at hacking and breaking filters by proxy servers.

‘Covering Iran has never been easy for any of us,’ she continued, concluding her talk. ‘The most difficult assignment for you (pointing at Ms Palmer), the most difficult job I chose... and the Iranian government keeps throwing new challenges at us every day, hence the need for gatherings like this event today – for us journalists inside Iran, people who have just left Iran, people who are here trying to cover a story from a closed box, trying to peek into the country, while our hands are completely closed from it. Gatherings like this are very valuable so that we can share experiences, exchange ideas and tell our stories.’

‘Covering Iran: the role of conventional and non-conventional media’ took place at SOAS, University of London, on Wednesday, June 16, 2010, and was organised by the School’s Centre for Media and Film Studies. The panel chairs were Professor Charles Tripp, Dr Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, Dr Nima Mina and Professor Annabelle Sreberny. The Persian translator was Shahab Mossavat

Anabel Inge is the Co-ordinating Editor of The Middle East in London, the magazine of the London Middle East Institute, SOAS, and a PhD candidate in the Department of Theology & Religious Studies at King’s College London. ai7@soas.ac.uk

PARTICIPANTS:

Session 1: Covering Iran: journalistic practices inside and outside Iran

William O Beeman is Professor and Chair of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Minnesota. He was trained at the University of Chicago as a linguistic anthropologist. He is a past President of the Middle East Section of the American Anthropological Association and a former Director of Middle East Studies at Brown University. The author of more than 100 scholarly articles and 600 opinion pieces, appearing internationally, Dr Beeman has also served as consultant to the US State Department, the US Department of Defense, the United Nations and the European Union, as well as having testified before the US Congress. His books include, *Language, Status and Power in Iran; Culture, Performance and Communication in Iran; The 'Great Satan' vs. the 'Mad Mullahs': How the United States and Iran Demonize Each Other*, and *Iranian Performance Forms: Keys to Iranian Culture* (currently in press).

Gholam Khiabany is Reader in International Communications at London Metropolitan University. His research interests centre on media and social change, and the relationship between communication, development, and democracy, with particular reference to Iran. He is the author of *Iranian Media: the Paradox of Modernity* (Routledge), and co-author (with Annabelle Sreberny) of *Blogestan* (I B Tauris, forthcoming).

Charles Tripp is Professor of Politics with reference to the Middle East, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. His research interests include the nature of autocracy, state and resistance in the Middle East and the politics of Islamic identity. He is the author of *Islam and the Moral Economy: The Challenge of Capitalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2006); *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) and the joint author of *Iran and Iraq at War* (I B Tauris, 1988) and of *Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order* (IISS, 1996); editor of *Contemporary Egypt: Through Egyptian Eyes* (Routledge, 1993); and co-editor of *Egypt under Mubarak* (Routledge, 1989) and *The Iraqi Aggression Against Kuwait* (Westview, 1996). He is currently working on a book examining *The Politics of Resistance in the Middle East*.

Session 2: Broadcasting from and to Iran

Arshin Adib-Moghaddam is the author of *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf: A Cultural Genealogy* (Routledge, 2006, 2009), *Iran in World Politics: The Question of the Islamic Republic* (Columbia University Press, 2008, 2010) and *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisations: Us and Them beyond Orientalism* (Columbia / Hurst, 2010, forthcoming). Educated at the Universities of Hamburg, American (Washington DC) and Cambridge, he was the first Jarvis Doctorow Fellow in International Relations and Peace Studies at St Edmund Hall and the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford. Since 2007, Adib-Moghaddam has been University Lecturer in Comparative and International Politics at SOAS, University of London. His writings have been translated into many languages and he is a frequent contributor to leading newspapers and TV channels around the world.

Afshin Rattansi is an independent producer for international television news channels and co-host of *Rattansi & Ridley*, which airs on Press TV. He is a former producer for the BBC Today programme, CNN International, Bloomberg and Al Jazeera Arabic.

Jon Snow has been the anchor of Channel 4 News since 1989 and has also reported for ITN / Channel 4 since 1976. He was first sent to Iran in 1978 when he reported on the revolution and the US Embassy seizure / hostage crisis. Since then he has returned many times – transmitting Channel 4 news live nightly out of Iran in 2006. He has interviewed President Ahmadinejad on several occasions – most recently in late December 2009.

Sharan Tabari was born and raised in Iran. She studied Political Science and received her MA in Political Behaviour at the University of Essex. In 1976 Sharan joined the BBC and worked there until March 1979 when she returned to Iran. In October 1979 she was employed at the Faculty of Politics and subsequently the department of Politics and Law of Tehran University, where she worked as a lecturer until 1986. She returned to Britain in 1986, and re-joined the BBC as freelancer until 1994, along with working in the public sector. Since 1998 Sharan has been the Chief Correspondent in London for Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty. She has been an elected member of the Westminster City Council since 2001, serving the city as Councillor for two consecutive terms.

Session 3: the Rise of Citizen Media in Iran: the technologies and the players

Masoumeh Alinejad, also known as ‘Masih’, is an Iranian journalist and writer currently working as a freelance journalist, working for Jaras and Rooz, among other organisations. She is well known for her criticism of Iranian authorities. She was a parliamentary reporter for the Iranian Labour News Agency and a journalist at *Hambastegi Daily* and *Etemad Melli Daily*. Several of her articles were followed by harsh criticism from conservative parties in Iran. In 2008 the former Iranian head of parliament apologised after an article by Alinejad was published in *Etemad Melli Daily* on economic problems in Iran. She was a parliamentary correspondent for *Hambastegi Daily* and the ILNA for four years before being banned from parliament in 2005. This ban brought her worldwide media attention since she had exposed a significant increase in deputies’ salaries that had not been made public. She has published three books in Persian: *Tahasson*, describing the political turmoil / challenges created when the ‘Sixth Iranian Parliament’ went on strike. *Taje-e-Khar* (‘the crown of thorn’) is a novel that is now being translated into English. *I am Free*, which deals with women’s issues in Iran, was published in Germany because of the ban by the Islamic Culture and Guidance Ministry in Iran. Masoumeh was the winner of the first annual Mehdi Semsar Foundation’s Omid Journalism Award from the Mehdi Semsar Foundation. She was arrested as an activist for producing leaflets critical of the government in 1994.

Jamileh Kadivar has throughout her career combined her academic work with an involvement in the media. She is both Editor-in-Chief of Jaras and a political scientist based at Tehran’s Alzahra women’s university where she is a lecturer in the Economy and Social Science faculties and a member of the university’s Scientific Board. She has also been a member of the Iranian parliament from 2000 to 2004 and, before that, a local councillor on Tehran’s City Council from 1999 to 2000. She has published widely on a wide range of topics, among them women’s participation in the political process, Iran’s relations with the Arab world and political Islam.

John Kelly is the founder and lead scientist of Morningside Analytics, USA. John's research blends social network analysis, content analysis and statistics to solve the problem of making complex online networks visible and understandable. He has directed studies of numerous international blogospheres, as well as domestic networks. He has a PhD in Communications from Columbia University and has also studied communications at Stanford and at Oxford's Internet Institute. He is also an Affiliate at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, where he works with the Internet and Democracy Project to design and implement empirical studies of the Internet's role in politics globally.

Scott Lucas is Professor of American Studies at the University of Birmingham (UK), where he has worked since 1989. A specialist in US and British foreign policy, he has written and edited nine books, more than 40 major articles and a radio documentary, and co-directed the 2007 film *Laban!* In November 2008 Prof Lucas launched *Enduring America* (soon to be *EA World View*), a cutting-edge blog on US politics and international affairs. The site, now ranked in the Top 30 websites on World Politics, has a particular emphasis on coverage of US-Iranian relations and Iran. Its LiveBlog on Iranian developments has run every day since 13 June 2009, and it is considered one of the foremost sites for political analysis of the developing situation. Formerly a journalist in the United States, Prof Lucas has written for newspapers including *The Guardian* and *The Independent* and was an essayist for *The New Statesman*. He appears regularly on British, American and international radio and television as a specialist on current affairs, politics and history.

Nima Mina is a senior lecturer in Persian and Iranian Studies at SOAS. He received his academic training in Marburg, Germany, and Montréal, Québec. His research interests include contemporary Iranian Diaspora Studies, Persian prison memoir writing and, more recently, the impact of new media on the progress of Iranian civil society.

Saeed Valadbaygee is a journalist and political activist, who started his political engagement with student and university publications and politics. Weblogging, being an on-line editor of several publications, as well as his work in journalism and reportage resulted in his being repeatedly detained and imprisoned in Iran. In addition to his political activities, he for many years worked as a labour rights activist in the Iranian industrial sector. As a result of his repeated imprisonment and the political and security environment in Iran, where he was constantly being pursued by the authorities (and hence always on the run), he was finally forced into exile. He established the first charity school for socially abused children who are victims of violence and labour trafficking, in association with UN and charitable institutions in Turkey. While in Turkey, he furthered his experience by teaching and by researching the refugee communities who were victims of violence in countries such as Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. He is currently resident in Canada, where he is studying journalism and political science and actively consulting several local newspapers and media sources as a political and labour analyst.

Session 4: Media Content and Control

Mahmood Enayat is a doctoral student at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford. His academic work centres on state censorship and control of the internet, online political discourse and collective action in Persian cyberspace. Mahmood

holds a Masters degree in Analysis, Design and Implementation of Information Systems from the London School of Economics (2006), as well as a BSc in Computer Science with Management from King's College London (2005). He is also the Director of Iran at the BBC World Service Trust, where he is responsible for managing the Iran online journalism development project.

Pooneh Ghoddoosi has a BA in English Language and Translation from the University of Tehran and completed her postgraduate studies in Journalism and Photography at the University of Toronto. She began her journalism career in 1990 at the time of the deadly earthquake in northern Iran. Since then she has worked with numerous media organisations, including the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *PBS*, *USA Today*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *Business Week*, *Toronto Star* and *The Washington Post*. She joined the BBC Persian service in 2000 as a radio producer and presenter. She has worked as a producer for the flagship BBC Television News programme 'Newsnight' and presented 'World Briefing' and daily news bulletins on the BBC World Service radio for five years. She joined BBC Persian Television as presenter of the interactive programme '*Nobat-e Shoma*' (Your Turn) from January 2009. Pooneh Ghoddoosi is currently managing a project examining and promoting effective utilisation of social media across the BBC World Service.

Kelly Golnoush Niknejad was born in Iran and moved to the United States when she was 17, in the middle of the Iran–Iraq War. She holds a BA in Political Science and a law degree with an international and European focus. Following her initial news work in Southern California and Massachusetts, Niknejad moved to New York City, where she conducted academic research on media and Iran. She earned two MA degrees in journalism from Columbia University, focusing first on print and subsequently on politics and government. Niknejad's work includes reporting for the *Los Angeles Times*, *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, *TIME Magazine* and *California Lawyer*. She has helped to produce two films on Iran for the investigative documentary series 'PBS Frontline', 'Showdown with Iran' and 'A Death in Tehran'. In November 2008 she launched Tehran Bureau, which became a focal point of news coverage of the election crisis only six months later. Tehran Bureau entered a partnership with Frontline in September 2009.

Elizabeth Palmer was born in London and brought up in Canada. She graduated with Honours in English and Linguistics from the University of British Columbia, then worked as a newspaper reporter in Canada until her return to the UK to do a Master's degree in Journalism at the University of Wales. After graduation, she worked for BBC Radio News, then returned to Canada to join the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Her career at the CBC spanned 20 years – first as a petroleum and business reporter, then as Mexico City correspondent and finally Bureau Chief and correspondent in the CBC's Moscow Bureau. In 2000 she left CBC to join CBS News – first as the network's Moscow correspondent and later as a correspondent based in London. Ms Palmer, an award-winning reporter in both radio and television, has covered the news in South America, Europe and the Middle East. She has most recently covered the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and travels frequently to report from Iran.

Annabelle Sreberny is Professor and Director of the Centre for Media and Film Studies at SOAS, University of London. She is the elected President of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (www.iamcr.org). She has been researching issues around Iranian media and democratisation for over 30 years. Her book *Small Media, Big*

Revolution: Communication, Culture and the Iranian Revolution examined the dynamics of the 1979 revolution. *Blogistan*, written with Gholam Khiabany, is in press with I B Tauris, and examines the impact of the internet on Iranian politics and includes an analysis of the Green movement's media.