

Electronic Sanctions: Targeting Iran's Media, Preventing Iranians from Using the Internet

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The inhumane sanctions of the United States and its European allies against Iran know no boundaries. At the cost of the lives of thousands of Iranian patients suffering from different types of cancer, thalassemia, hemophilia, HIV/Aids, psychiatric disorders and other diseases, the West has banned the export of life-saving medicines and medical equipments to Iran and this is deteriorating the lives of those patients who cannot find medicines needed for their survival. The companies that do business with Iran will be immediately penalized by the U.S. government and so far no exemptions have been made to ensure that ordinary Iranian citizens will at least get access to foodstuff, medicines and other humanitarian goods.

The recent wave of sanctions have also targeted Iranian media as several satellite providers across Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America have taken Iranian television channels off air, denying millions of viewers around the world the chance to find an alternative, Iranian perspective on the world affairs.

However, the sanctions have been so extensive and widespread that they even deprive the Iranian citizens from enjoying the latest productions of technology.

The internet explorer "Google Chrome" is unavailable for downloading to the Iranian users, and so are the instant messaging software "Google Chrome", picture sharing platform "Picasa" and the geographical surveying application "Google Earth." Although the Iranian computer geeks know tricks to circumvent these limitations, for the majority of Iranian computer users these services are not easy-to-access.

Ironically, Google lifted the limitations in early 2011 when the opponents of President Ahmadinejad had taken to the streets and staged demonstrations. Google announced that it will ease the restrictions to allow the protesters communicate more smoothly and organize rallies and mass demonstrations. "There are many activist layers on Google Earth. Anyone can create a layer to show exactly what is going on in Iran," said Google's head of public policy Scott Rubin.

Rubin also said that having access to Google Chrome will be also useful for the protesters: "in a country with a history of government surveillance it is useful having a browser that can't easily be hacked."

So it's clear that even when the American internet giant made some concessions, it did not intend to serve the interests of the Iranian people in general, but only meant to contribute to the weakening of the government and empowerment of the opposition.

But the limitations imposed on Iranian internet users by the United States are not new or unprecedented. On August 19, 1997, President Clinton signed the 13059 executive order which stipulated harsh restrictions on Iranian internet users and computer companies in terms of using the U.S.-produced software, hardware and other technology products.

According to this order, “the exportation, reexportation, sale, or supply, directly or indirectly, from the United States, or by a United States person, wherever located, of any goods, technology, or services to Iran or the Government of Iran, including the exportation, reexportation, sale, or supply of any goods, technology, or services to a person in a third country” will be prohibited.

According to the U.S. Department of Treasury, only a handful of commonplace computer applications including document readers such as Acrobat Reader, plug-ins such as Flashplayer and Shockwave and “free mobile apps related to personal communications” are legally downloadable in Iran.

In April 2003, it was reported that in a racially discriminatory and politically motivated decision, the popular career and job-finding website Monster.com removed the profiles and résumés of users from a number of countries on the U.S. Department of State’s blacklist including Iran, Syria, Sudan, Myanmar, Cuba, Libya and North Korea.

In a March 21, 2012 report, the CNet’s political correspondent Declan McCullagh wrote that Google has also restricted Iranian users’ access to Android Market, known as Google Play.

Collin Anderson, an independent researcher in North Dakota has listed a number of U.S.-based technology products that are unavailable to Iranian users. These products include, but are not limited to, Apple’s iOS app store, McAfee’s antivirus software, Oracle’s Java and MySQL, Adobe Acrobat Reader, DropBox, Real Player, Google AdWords, and Google Android Market.

But the unfair measures taken by the U.S. government as dictated to the American internet, IT and other technology-related service providers have gone beyond the pale and are now taking the form of racial discrimination. It was reported in June 2012 that an Apple Store in Alpharetta, Georgia refused to sell an iPhone and iPad to the Persian-speaking customers, resorting to the excuse that they may send at least one of these devices to their friends in Iran!

When Sara Sabet, a 19-year-old student of the Georgia University went to an Apple Store in a local mall with her friend to buy a couple of iDevices, the salesperson found her speaking in a foreign language. The employee asked her what language she spoke, where she was from and where the iPad and iPhone she were heading to. She responded by saying that she is from Iran and wants to send the devices to her friend in Iran. It was then that the Apple employee responded by saying, “I just can’t sell this to you. Our countries have bad relations.” Sabet said that she left the store and shed tears all the way back to home.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations called the Apple Store’s treatment of the Iranian student discriminatory in a statement issued in condemnation: “Apple must revise its policies to ensure that customers do not face discriminatory treatment based on their religion, ethnicity or national origin,” said CAIR National Executive Director Nihad Awad. “If the actions of these Apple employees reflected company policy, that policy must be changed and all employees retrained.”

Overall, this is how the Iranians are being treated by a government which has always been busy trumpeting its anxiety and nervousness for the protection of human rights around the world. Perhaps Iranians are paying the price for the independence of their nation and their refusal to be brought under the hegemonic domination of the United States. These sanctions which directly affect the daily lives of ordinary citizens show the extent to which the U.S. government can be brutal and ruthless to deprive a nation of its most rudimentary and basic rights. Can anyone really understand what Uncle Sam is doing?

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