#IRANVOTES2017

ANALYSING THE 2017 IRANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS THROUGH TELEGRAM, TWITTER AND INSTAGRAM
ABOUT SMALL MEDIA
Small Media is an organisation working to support internet freedom and human rights advocacy in the Middle East and Africa. We do this by providing research, design, training, and technology support to partners, and by working with organisations to develop effective and innovative digital advocacy strategies and campaigns. We also provide digital security support to a range of partners to ensure that they can work safely and securely.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Small Media would like to thank all of the report contributors who have chosen to remain anonymous for security purposes. This research would have been impossible without their generous assistance and support.

RESEARCH
James Marchant
Tom Ormson
Ali Honari
Amin Sabeti

DESIGN
Surasti Puri

A Small Media report

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.
Still widely touted as an ‘enemy of the internet’, Iran was given the third-lowest ranking in the 2016 Freedom House Freedom on the Net report. Despite wider government attempts to curtail the use of global social media networks, Twitter continues to play host to Iranian journalists and politicians, and in part thanks to reformist politician’s resistance to filtering, the messaging app Telegram’s user base inside Iran has purportedly exceeded 40 million, and Instagram is sweeping the nation, with Tehranis and conservative clerics alike spamming their followers with selfies and live streams.

In 2016, as Iranians went to the polls to elect the country’s 10th parliament, we worked to capture the twists and turns of the campaign as it unfolded on Twitter. Our report '#IranVotes: Political Discourse on Iranian Twitter During the 2016 Parliamentary Elections’ documented the communities that emerged on Twitter over the course of the campaign, and captured their perspectives on a range of issues from freedom of expression, to the tech economy and the fate of Iran’s political prisoners.

Since we published this report, despite being successful in increasing internet penetration to 45%, Iran’s authorities have done little to ease their attempts to control the flow of information.

In May 2017 – for the first time in Iran’s modern history – moderates, reformists and conservatives galvanised around their candidates online, enthusiastically transforming social media networks from platforms for citizen-led debate into true political battlegrounds for the candidates and their campaign machines.

In this report we build on the framework established in the 2016 report, and assess the growing political influence of social media within Iran. In 2016 we found the Iranian Twittersphere to be primarily reformist and unipolar, so we have included Instagram and Telegram in this research to assess a broader landscape of users.

First, we explore the rise of new social media platforms in Iran, and establish the reasons behind their rapid growth in popularity. Our research then turns back to Iran’s Twittersphere, reflecting on the platform’s stagnation and the continued dominance of Iran’s diaspora networks, reformists and the People’s Mujahedin of Iran’s botnet.

Instagram occupied a central and dominant place in the election campaigns, and attracted unexpectedly high levels of commitment and engagement by the leading candidates Ebrahim Raeisi and Hassan Rouhani. In this report we compare and contrast the content production patterns of the two main camps,


6 The People’s Mujahedin of Iran is also known as the MEK or the PMOI. The MEK’s efforts to flood Twitter with content are noted in an earlier blog post by Small Media: Small Media, (2017), '#IranVotes 2017 // Mapping Out Twitter’, last accessed: 09/10/2017, https://smallmedia.org.uk/news/iranvotes-2017-mapping-out-twitter
and discover how the candidates and their supporters attempted to influence public opinion online.

Lastly we turn to Iran’s most popular messaging app Telegram, to establish how it was used over the election period. The functionalities of Telegram made an exhaustive network analysis challenging, so we elected to focus on a handful of influential Telegram accounts and channels to explore how the platform was used to disseminate information and connect users to content on other social media platforms.

This report is the first comprehensive overview of the Iranian social media sphere under Rouhani, and the first that focuses on Instagram and Telegram, the social spaces at the heart of everyday users’ experiences. Twitter and Facebook are no longer the best window through which to view online public political discourse, and we strongly encourage other researchers to refocus their attention towards these more widely used platforms.

Online campaigning and political communications are no longer the preserve of tech-savvy reformists. Conservatives are pouring time and energy into professionalising their operations, and are now getting their messages out to the Iranian electorate by way of the very social media platforms they so often chastise.

Although Raeisi wasn’t successful this time around, our research shows that conservatives are getting increasingly savvy in their online operations. This marks a radical transformation in the conservative establishment’s stance on free expression online. Rather than suppressing online political debate altogether, there is a growing recognition among conservatives that to remain electorally relevant they must instead work to shape it. We predict that future electoral campaigns might see more successful efforts by conservatives to mobilise their base, challenging the upper-hand in mass mobilisation currently enjoyed by reformists.
1

SOCIAL MEDIA IN IRAN
A SHORT HISTORY
Social media platforms have occupied a significant place in Iranian political discourse since rising to the forefront of the national agenda during the highly contested 2009 presidential elections. Although the 2009 unrest marked a watershed moment in shaping the regulation of social media platforms, the authorities had been grappling with how to regulate and monitor online expression for years. Throughout the late 2000s, Iran's 'Blogestan' brought scores of netizens, journalists and activists together online to formulate and exchange political, social, and cultural ideas. The rise of Facebook and Twitter eclipsed these blogging platforms—partly as a result of creeping government regulation and surveillance, and also because the platforms failed to offer effective mechanisms for conversation and community building. Recently there has been a similar shift from Facebook and Twitter towards Telegram and Instagram, neither of which are filtered in Iran.

In this chapter we'll provide a brief history of social media platforms in Iran, discussing their influence, reach, and the ways that different governments have sought to regulate and restrict online expression over the years. This will give us enough context to be able to situate the government's response within broader historical patterns and explain the recent surge in popularity of Telegram and Instagram.

1.1 'Blogestan'
The Birth of Iran's Online Public

Iran once punched far above its weight with the sheer volume and variety of blogging content produced in the mid-late 2000s. A 2007 NITLE study suggested that Persian was the 9th most-used language in the global blogosphere, despite being the 22nd most-spoken language globally.⁷ Among a number of commentators, a discourse began to emerge of 'Blogestan' as an emancipatory space in which progressive-minded, liberal young Iranians were beginning to articulate their demands for a free and open society and for a politics grounded in values of transparency and democracy.⁸

In reality, 'Blogestan' was a complex and multifaceted space where bloggers from a range of backgrounds set out their stalls and shared their perspectives on issues ranging from classical poetry to theology, anti-Zionism, LGBT rights and Persian pop music. This diversity was explored in Berkman-Klein’s seminal 2008 study ‘Mapping Iran’s Online Public: Politics and Culture in the Persian Blogosphere’,⁹ and Small Media's 2013 report on conservative bloggers called 'Unmasking the Arzeshi',¹⁰ as well as numerous other pieces of scholarly research.¹¹

By putting the divergent (and on many occasions oppositional) objectives, content and ideals of Iranian bloggers on show for the first time, these studies.

---


⁸ The Blogestan phenomenon was widely documented. Works cataloguing the development of the Persian blogosphere included Nasrin Alavi’s “We Are Iran” (2005), and Babak Rahimi’s article, “Cyberdissent: The Internet in Revolutionary Iran,” Middle East Review of International Affairs 7.3 (2003).


proved once and for all that online spaces are as rich and complex as the societies from which they emerged.

After Ahmadinejad was contentiously re-elected in 2009, the state began an attempt to push back against perceived Western influences by producing pro-revolution and religious-focused content for the Persian blogosphere. Small Media’s report ‘Unmasking the Arzeshi’ documented these efforts, finding them lacking in sophistication and crude in their tactics. The religious and pro-revolutionary blogs of conservative activists were infrequently updated and largely populated by reshared content—they were rarely engaged with.12

Blogestan provided early opportunities for the Iranian government to trial its approaches to managing the flow of information online, whether by censoring content outright, or flooding online spaces with content produced by conservative activists.13 Blogestan’s star fell dramatically with the rise of Facebook and Twitter, and while it may be no more, the information control methods developed to contain it have been reiterated and readapted by Iranian conservative activists on the platforms that emerged in its wake.

1.2 Iran’s ‘Twitter Revolution’

The Legacy of 2009

In the immediate aftermath of the widely contested 2009 re-election of Ahmadinejad, a vast swath of literature emerged praising the role Twitter played in coordinating nationwide protests that erupted. The platform was characterised as a valuable agent for democratic empowerment, a tool that enabled its users to organise a mass protest movement that threatened to topple the Ahmadinejad administration.14

The US State Department even asked Twitter to postpone scheduled downtime so the platform would be kept online for Iranian users.15 However, this furor over the role of Twitter and Facebook in the unrest—now widely established as overstated—ultimately resulted in blowback against the two platforms in Iran. Newly re-elected President Ahmadinejad and Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali

---

12 The number of content producers within the conservative blogosphere was very limited. Small Media found only 316 sites that seemed to form the content-producing ‘core’ of the network of conservative blogs active during the election period. Ibid.


Khamenei ensured their ruthless street crackdowns simultaneously enveloped the digital landscape; it did not take long for authorities to block Twitter.16 Twitter remains filtered today and is inaccessible without the use of circumvention tools.17 However, a number of prominent politicians have established a presence on Twitter, including (rather ironically) Ahmadinejad – the man who oversaw the site’s blocking in the first place – and Supreme Leader Khamenei, who was an early adopter back in March 2009. A rather sporadic user, Ahmadinejad has tweeted proclamations that the world deserves “freedom, justice and love”, and incredulously asked Western media outlets whether he could really be accused of seeking to reduce Iranian citizen’s freedoms while in office (see Figure 1).

Ahmadinejad’s arrival onto Twitter in January 2017 illustrates better than anything how Iranian conservatives’ relationship with the platform has transformed in recent months. There appears to be a newly discovered understanding that the censorship of Twitter is stifling conservative voices more than it is their reformist rivals. After all, President Rouhani’s office and the offices of many of his ministers openly sidestep the state’s flimsy information controls, flouting the rules to use censored platforms18.

1.2.1 The Role of Twitter Looking Back

Our study of the Iranian Twittersphere builds upon the foundations of our 2016 report #IranVotes: Political Discourse on Iranian Twitter During the 2016 Parliamentary Elections. Our previous research found Iran’s Twittersphere predominantly reformist, unipolar, and dominated by influential voices rooted in the diaspora community, and concluded: "We find that the scale of Twitter activity among diaspora Iranians and more liberal segments of Iranian society has had two major impacts upon the political makeup of the Twittersphere:

Firstly, a general politicization of the Twittersphere; and secondly, the squeezing out of politically divergent voices—especially from conservative factions, who appear to have found their home on alternative (unblocked) social networking sites.”19

Over the past year, anecdotal evidence points towards the decentralisation of Iran’s filtering apparatus causing a gradual expansion of Twitter’s Iranian user base. Since Iran devolved the responsibility for filtering Twitter to ISPs in November 2016, a number of ISPs have opened access to the platform and user engagement has started to increase.20 We explore whether this has had a significant impact upon the nature of political discourse on Twitter in Chapter 2.

Another question we revisit is the role of Twitter bots. In last year’s report, we highlighted the intense content production activities of the botnet army of the People’s Mujahed in Iran (MEK) and contrasted this with their relative isolation within the broader Persian-speaking Twittersphere. Despite producing high levels of content, they lacked influence over the conversation.

Fast forward to 2017 and we revisit this topic to find out if the MEK has changed its botnet strategy. We also

---


17 It should be noted that ICT Minister Mahmoud Vaezi called for these restrictions to be lifted in July 2017: Jamaran, (2017), ‘The Communications Minister calls for a review of Twitter filtering’, Jamaran, last accessed: 28/7/2017, http://bit.ly/2hZRsLS


19 #IranVotes: Political Discourse on Iranian Twitter During the 2016 Parliamentary Elections’, p. 9.

extend our gaze to the wider network to ascertain whether reformist or conservative political actors have made any efforts to replicate the MEK’s bot-driven tactics. Our research establishes that the MEK’s practices on Twitter have continued in a manner generally unchanged since last year. They continue to hijack Twitter hashtags and flood the platform with their tweets decrying the human rights record of the Islamic Republic while exalting the MEK’s quasi-cult leader Maryam Rajavi.

In this report we narrow our exploration of the Twittersphere and focus solely on political discourse and the communities that used Twitter for the purpose of sharing election-related content. Twitter is no longer the key facilitator of online political discussions; to understand how Iranian citizens are using technology to open up political debate, we have refocused our efforts towards the new digital spaces they inhabit.

1.3 Iran’s Online Landscape Transformed

Iran’s New Social Media Giants

Coinciding with somewhat more liberal state perceptions of the use of social media in Iran, two new players have taken up a dominant position in Iran’s digital landscape, Instagram and Telegram. The two platforms have rocketed in popularity among Iranian netizens, due to remaining (relatively) free from state censorship thanks to reformists within the government pushing back against further restrictions on social media platforms.

Both platforms are interesting choices as arenas for political discourse – Instagram is driven almost entirely by visual content and Telegram’s channel functionality lends itself more to top-down information dissemination than community-led engagement.

With that in mind, let’s look at how these platforms have been able to topple the former social media kingpins (Facebook and Twitter) and consider the implications for the development of online political discourse in Iran.

1.3.1 Instagram

A Developing Picture

With more than 20 million users in Iran, Instagram has established itself as a near-ubiquitous presence in Iran’s online ecology. The platform rapidly grew in popularity, with its appeal extending from the chic, moneyed and fashion-obsessed denizens of North Tehran, to the farmers of rural Mazandaran and Qomi clerics.

Although it remains unfiltered for now, Instagram has had a somewhat troubled relationship with Iranian censors. Its relatively small pre-2013 Iranian user base kept it off the radar of the Ahmadinejad administration and thereby spared it the same blunt censorship as Twitter and Facebook. By the time Instagram attracted a large enough audience to bring it to the attention of Iranian authorities in 2014, the Rouhani administration had taken office and Mahmoud Vaezi, a moderate, was in control of the ICT Ministry. Rather than blocking the site entirely, the ICT Ministry announced the implementation of what it termed ‘intelligent filtering’. "Intelligent filtering", a much-heralded form of filtering, seeks to block access to ‘offensive’ social media content by using deep packet inspection (DPI) to examine data being sent between Instagram’s servers and user’s mobile applications, cross-referencing the content against pre-defined criteria, and blocking access where deemed necessary.


One of the most prominent examples of intelligent filtering to reach the mainstream Western media took place on the ‘Rich Kids of Tehran’ Instagram page. The page was an outlet for the vanity of the glamorous, cash-drenched and self-consciously decadent young elite of North Tehran to bare their wealth to the world. The account provided a window into the hard-partying lives of Tehran’s young moneyed classes. Pages such as this, and those of modelling agencies, and (mostly female) international celebrities were the key targets of censorship at this time. A 2015 Global Voices investigation showed that political activists and noted dissidents were not targeted by the measures, implying that authorities saw Instagram as an agent of potential moral degeneracy rather than an outlet for political grievance.

The truth is that Iran’s ‘intelligent filtering’ programme was either half-baked in its creation, or half-hearted in its implementation. The entire system rapidly began to unravel when Instagram implemented the Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) protocol in mid-2015. With the roll-out of SSL encryption to Instagram, Iranian censors were subsequently unable to use deep-packet inspection to filter content. In the wake of the failure of the ‘intelligent filtering’ apparatus, authorities have turned to more heavy-handed methods for limiting free expression on Instagram.

On a number of occasions in recent years, prominent Iranian Instagrammers have been detained and charged for content shared online. Eight prominent models were arrested in May 2016 for posting ‘un-Islamic’ images, all part of a wider judiciary-led investigation.

---


into online modelling agencies that investigated 170 individuals. Tehran's cybercrimes court prosecutor Javad Babaei deemed the agencies responsible for "making and spreading immoral and un-Islamic culture and [encouraging] promiscuity." Such arrests illustrate Iranian authorities' perception of an ongoing cultural war being waged upon social media platforms, which many hardliners see as posing "threats to morality and the foundation of [the] family." 

Although the Iranian judiciary has intermittently pursued individual users and conservative activists have harassed individuals producing 'immoral' content, Iranian policymakers have largely eased the pressure on Instagram in 2017. Conservatives have mostly ceased making calls for the platform to be blocked entirely, and there is widespread recognition within the Iranian policy sphere that the outright filtering of Instagram is both untenable and undesirable. 

In the current climate, Instagram is quickly developing a powerful role as a tool for political communications in Iran. Reformist activists and online conservatives alike took to the platform during the 2017 presidential campaign in an effort to champion their candidates, and to make a play for the support of Iran's young voters. We explore this more in Chapter 3.

1.3.2 Telegram
Changing the Channel

Although Instagram was an important election battleground over the course of the campaign, the most widely-used social communications platform in Iran today is the messaging app Telegram, which has approximately 40 million users inside the country. Telegram provides a unique platform for Iranian netizens to share images and videos, and chat about entertainment, sport, culture, and – crucially – politics.

Telegram was founded in 2014 by Russian brothers Nikolai and Pavel Durov, who sought to create a messaging app that prioritised the privacy of its users – initially with Russian surveillance as their key concern. When rival messaging app Viber was filtered in Iran in early 2014, many Iranians flocked to the more available alternative Telegram. The user base continued to grow at an astonishing rate, and shows no sign of abating as more and more Iranians get online. News organisations, satellite TV channels, and eventually government agencies followed the mass migration of users to Telegram and began exploiting the channel functionalities of the app to deliver information.

Significant channels on the app include BBC Persian (905,000 followers), Manoto1 (217,000 followers), Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (1,027,000 followers), President Hassan Rouhani (17,800 followers), and even Iran's Ministry of ICT (1,600 followers).

Despite being a valuable information dissemination platform for the Iranian authorities, Telegram has also faced ongoing pressure from them to make concessions regarding information sharing and server hosting. In December 2016, after interminable grumbling from conservative politicians eager for the platform to be blocked entirely, the Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC) announced that administrators of Telegram channels with more than 5,000 subscribers would be required to register their

---


29 Ibid.

30 In March 2016 the website Mofsedin was established by conservatives as a portal to identify and report Instagram pages that contravened Iranian law, and to provide this information to the police and intelligence services. The site was available at http://mofsedin.info/ but is no longer active as of July 2017.


Admins were required to submit the name of the channel along with their own full name, home address and national identification number. Fears that this could be used to crackdown on dissent were vindicated when 14 reformist-leaning channel admins were arrested on vague “national security-related” charges in March 2017. The arrests were overseen by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a paramilitary force loyal to Supreme Leader Khamenei.

Despite reassurances from Telegram’s founders that they will never share data with government entities, the ICT Ministry claims they are in collaboration. This could be a clever tactic; it is possible the Rouhani administration is fabricating or exaggerating its relationship with Telegram to justify the platform’s continued availability.

Despite these concerns aside, Telegram is currently the most widely used digital platform in Iran, with at least half of all Iranian citizens among its user base. As such, it’s of crucial importance to consider the role the platform plays in facilitating political engagement and disseminating campaign information to Iranian voters. Our analysis in Chapter 4 develops a foundation for just that.

---


2
TWITTER
Although Twitter continues to maintain a presence in Iran’s social media landscape, the platform’s user base has not evolved dramatically over the past year. The largest user groups are still reformist-leaning (and thus Rouhani-supporting) Iranians based both inside and outside Iran, but there is a small and increasingly more active conservative presence, which propagated Raeisi’s core messages around corruption and economic inequality throughout the election period. Also, as we noted in our previous report, the MEK’s bot network continues to flood Iran’s Twittersphere with content. There is still value in mapping Iran’s Twittersphere during election periods in order to develop our understanding of how its usage varies from that of Instagram and Telegram. Popular pieces of content produced on Twitter were transplanted onto Telegram in order to reach a wider audience and spark wider discussions. Engaging in analysis of single social media platforms in Iran is far less rich than a multi-platform study, as the networks are constantly colliding and interacting. So, without further ado, let’s investigate the part played by Twitter.

2.1 The Map is Not the Territory
Network Analysis

On page 15 is a map of the engagements between Persian-speaking Twitter users between 10 and 25 May 2017. Only those users whose tweets contained election-related terms were collected in this study. By using the modularity routine provided by network analytics software Gephi, we were able to detect communities and then compartmentalise the network into sub-networks. By splitting the network into sub-networks, we were able to identify clusters within each community. This approach detected 20,492 unique users, and assigned them to eight distinct clusters.

2.1.1 Twitter Clusters

There are five core clusters and two marginal clusters in our map. The three ‘Reformists’ clusters (purple, green and dark pink) are closely intertwined, and could essentially be said to comprise one greater cluster of reformist users. The ‘Critical Activists’ group (orange) is a rather broad group comprised of users who rallied around posts from apolitical diaspora civil society organisations and radical anti-government users eager to tear down the institutions of the Islamic Republic in their entirety. This cluster forms a long ‘bridge’ between the moderate reformist clusters and the peripheral MEK cluster.

The ‘Mujahedin-e Khalq’ cluster (black) is isolated and broadly inward-looking. Although sizeable, its distance from the other clusters shows a lack of engagement between MEK accounts and the broader political network. Regardless of how much content the MEK is producing, there are few paths for it to reach or


36 The methodology used in this report shows a slight change in approach from our 2016 report which collected data from across the Persian Twittersphere.
Figure 3  Iranian Twittersphere Clusters
influence users in other clusters.
The ‘Conservatives’ cluster (blue) comprises more users than the MEK cluster, but still accounts for less than a quarter of the combined reformist grouping. This cluster interacts more with reformists and radical users than the MEK cluster does, but it remains rather insular.

The ‘Mixed Users’ clusters are collections of users that did not fall neatly within the other clusters, and were not particularly active.

Studying the MEK’s presence on the Iranian Twittersphere illustrates how difficult it is to analyse genuine engagement on the platform. With the exception of election day, MEK accounts were consistently among the top five most-frequently retweeted accounts weekly between 10-26 May. Despite these impressive-looking statistics, we know from our previous research – and the cluster map above – that the MEK grouping on Twitter is little more than an echochamber.

There is also an issue in that standard measures of engagement on Twitter – the number of likes, mentions and retweets, are not representative of true engagement. Given that a high total of retweets could appear as the result of botnets like that of the MEK, retweets or likes cannot be authoritatively said to be illustrative of genuine engagement.

In summary, then, these numbers demonstrate the general size of each of the political communities active on Twitter, but cannot give us a clear picture of the activity of each of these clusters. Let’s now turn to the question of activity and engagement.

2.2 Spam-Fisted Automation and Botnets on Twitter

Looking at the size of these communities can only tell us so much. What we are ultimately interested in is the extent to which each of these communities contributed to online debate during the election period.

The ‘lifetime’ total of user tweets – the number of tweets a user has made since setting up their account – varies from a low of 1,535 tweets among conservative users, up to a high of 12,038 among MEK accounts. During the campaign period, the disparity was similarly apparent – on average, MEK-affiliated users posted more than twice as frequently as users in the Critical Activists cluster – the next most-active cluster during the election period.

Also notable is the comparative lack of activity within the Conservative cluster as compared to the leading Reformists clusters during the election period.

The intense activity of the MEK cluster was commented upon by New York Times journalist Nilo Tabrizy during the election campaign. As noted by analyst Collin Anderson, many of the MEK’s tweets were stored on a publicly-accessible Pastebin account, which was likely used as a resource for MEK-affiliated accounts. The Pastebin account continues to be updated with new resources for Twitter-based campaigns, including a number of tweet directories targeting Canadian politicians and lobbying them to support Bill S-219 (the ‘Non-Nuclear Sanctions Against Iran Act’) to implement tougher sanctions against Iran.

As established in last year’s report, extra-cluster engagement with MEK posts is incredibly limited, and the MEK network ends up existing as a something of a vacuum-sealed echo chamber. Nonetheless, given their persistent efforts to inject misinformation into the political discourse on Twitter, we thought it worth addressing their activities in greater detail. Using Data for Democracy’s model for identifying bots and disinformation on social media.

37 A particularly stark example of Twitter bots flooding social media streams was shared in a video by New York Times journalist Nilo Tabrizy on Twitter: https://twitter.com/ntabrizy/status/865570237260775430

Collin Anderson’s response is available here: https://twitter.com/CDA/status/865579185955360772

Let's look to establish how and why the MEK has established its network in this way.

2.2.1 Robotweets

To establish how the MEK network functions, we collected data on the Twitter activities of 20 top MEK Twitter accounts from 21/04 – 26/05. To compare to 'normal' use of Twitter by Iranians, we also coded and collected data from 20 Reformist Twitter accounts. The comparison turned out to be quite stark, with the Reformist accounts totalling 3,293 tweets and retweets, to the MEK's 8,932.

One of the clearest disparities was in the content types produced by the two samples. Interestingly, during this period, 86% of the content produced by the MEK accounts was formed out of – theoretically – 'original' tweets, with the other 14% consisting of retweets. This differed from the Reformist accounts, from which only 39% of content was 'original', and 69% was retweeted content.

This division of retweets and original content surprised us at first – we expected that the MEK botnet would be almost entirely constituted by retweets and replies. But we would argue that these top-line statistics are representative of our sampling method, gathering data from the top 20 most widely retweeted MEK accounts. These accounts appear to have been among the core content producers of the network – their content was retweeted a staggering 18,295 times over the period, suggesting that the MEK's botnet works to retweet and disseminate the content of this core of content producers. An example of such a bot is the user @mohamaldi500 – 85% of the

---

account’s activity from 21/04 – 26/05 consisted of posting ‘original’ tweets. The account spams the network with typical MEK-related content, covering executions, highlighting acts of political repression by the Iranian government, and promoting Maryam Rajavi.

There appear to be two approaches taken by MEK bots when distributing spam. Firstly, when coding the tweets of our sample accounts, it became clear that high-profile Twitter accounts that posted election related content were swiftly targeted with hundreds of replies. This was evidenced in our sample by MEK reactions to The New York Times Video account (@nytvideo), which asked Iranians to get in touch regarding the 2017 election. Within hours, seven of the 20 MEK accounts had replied 45 times on the post, spamming various formulations of the same tweet, most furnished with a link to another MEK account’s post. These posts often contained graphic images of executions, and decried Iran’s human rights record (see Figure 3). It appears that a number of MEK bots are assigned to recognise and reply to Iran-related keywords appearing on Twitter – in this case, those relating to the election.

The botnet additionally hijacks specific hashtags relating to Iran, the election, and human rights. This is a constant phenomenon, and does not solely take place during election periods. A significant proportion of MEK bots are assigned to churning out content containing lists of key human rights-related hashtags and terms. This content is then picked up by other bots in the network, who in turn retweet and reply with links to other bot accounts and posts.

Secondly, the network’s core content producers mass-produce content on their pages, which is then picked up by retweet bots. In this way, the MEK was able to disseminate its content broadly across Twitter. The work of bots was also being supported by high-profile MEK supporters such as Dr. Majid Rafizadeh. A scholar at Harvard University, Rafizadeh has written positively about the MEK’s influence on major media outlets, and in pieces for paleoconservative think tanks such as the Gatestone Institute.⁴⁰

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>Average tweets per user (Lifetime)</th>
<th>Average tweets per user (10-25 May)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reformists (Media)</td>
<td>4705.37</td>
<td>3.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformists (Users)</td>
<td>7753.53</td>
<td>3.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td>1535.86</td>
<td>2.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mujahedin-e Khalq</td>
<td>12038.63</td>
<td>11.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Activists</td>
<td>7056.87</td>
<td>5.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformists (Media II)</td>
<td>3425.23</td>
<td>1.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Users</td>
<td>3247.16</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Users III</td>
<td>6448.16</td>
<td>3.49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the cluster maps illustrated, the large number of tweets and retweets simply contribute to echo chambers, with very little room for engagement or debate between opposing camps. This echo chamber is further perpetuated by the dominance of the reformist network, and the MEK botnet on Twitter. Although there appears to be some limited evidence of increased hardliner engagement on the platform, we remain skeptical that Twitter’s Iranian user base will ever expand to a level where it can represent the diverse political makeup of the country.

2.3 On the Agenda
Discussions and Campaigns

The ten hashtags that were most frequently used on Iranian Twitter over the course of the campaign can be broadly divided into two camps – ‘commentary’ tags, and ‘campaign’ tags. The seven ‘commentary’ tags are those hashtags which are – by themselves – essentially neutral:

- #Elections
- #Iran
- #Rouhani
- #Election96
- #Raeisi
- #Ghalibaf
- #Vote

Three ‘campaign’ hashtags are also present – all of which bear the hallmarks of a planned MEK Twitter offensive. All three campaigns were designed in a concerted effort to drive down turnout:

- #Overthrow_My_Vote
- #I_Won’t_Vote
- #Boycott_The_Election

Interestingly, after election day these three campaigns simply evaporated.
They didn’t fizzle out slowly, but rather – save for a tiny smattering of tweets – they vanished completely. It was as if someone had turned off a switch (and given they emerged from the MEK botnet, it is most likely they did). The disappearance of these three campaigns can be observed in Figure 5. Note the ongoing usage of the ‘commentary’ hashtags after May 20, as users’ discussions organically continued after the conclusion of the election. The ‘campaign’ hashtags, on the other hand, had no further purpose and could be retired by the MEK activists and bots that were sharing them. The lack of continued chatter after election day suggests that these hashtags utterly failed to capture the imagination of genuine Iranian Twitter users, suggesting that all their investments in the platform, the MEK’s Twitter propaganda campaigns were strikingly ineffectual. That being said, it is also notable that genuine reformist or conservative-affiliated campaigns did not break into the top of the rankings over the course of the election period. Although hashtags such as ‘#With_Rouhani_Until_1400’ were being shared on Twitter, they failed to make much headway – the hashtag was the only the 15th most widely shared hashtag during the campaign period. Despite being dominated by a generally reformist user base, Iranian Twitter remains light on political action – the predominance of ‘commentary’ hashtags suggests that (outside the MEK bubble) the platform is primarily used to obtain and share news rather than to push particular political agendas. Owing to its comparatively limited user base, the platform is still not viewed by political campaigns as a worthwhile space for investment during campaign season.
2.4 Conclusions
The Caged Bird

In all, we’ve seen few dramatic shifts in the shape or character of the Persian-speaking Twittersphere since we undertook our 2016 study of the network. Reformist and conservative users still inhabit broadly separate spheres without engaging each other in substantive debate or discussion. Critical activists occupy a continuum from human rights organisations (generally closely connected with reformist spheres) to anti-government radicals (who form a bridge to the MEK cluster).

The MEK are a small, isolated organisation lacking in influence or support in Iranian society. Having invested so many resources into Twitter – establishing a substantial network of automated and semi-automated accounts – it is truly striking how unsuccessful the organisation has been in cutting through to regular citizens on the platform. That said, it is also notable how infrequently the platform was used by the mainstream reformist and conservative camps to share campaign slogans or mobilise around political objectives.

In the Iranian context, Twitter largely functions to disseminate news, rather than to facilitate in-depth discussions. Given the staggering popularity of Telegram (and its news feed-like channel functionality), it may be that Twitter’s time has passed. Although Twitter remains a valuable bridge between reformist commentators in Iran and the diaspora, it is unclear how much influence the platform is really able to wield within society given the staggering growth of its social media rivals.
After a relatively slow start, Instagram has stormed into the foreground of Iran’s digital media landscape in the past two years. In this chapter, we’ll explore the impact of this growth upon political discourse in Iran, engaging in network analysis and content analysis to explain the role of the platform in the elections, and to show why Instagram has become such a potent tool for political communications in Iran at a time when it is still perceived as a politics-lite ecology in many other contexts globally.

3.1 The Big Picture

Instagram’s Core Functionalities

The 2017 election marked the point at which Instagram matured as an influential and hotly contested space for political communications in Iran. Unlike on Twitter, our analysis of political activity on Instagram reveals active and well-organised efforts by both reformist and conservative political activists (and candidates’ campaigns) to mobilise voters and attempt to influence public opinion.

We were also able to identify some features common to the political campaigns undertaken by Rouhani and Raeisi’s campaigns. Although there were similarities between both campaigns, in that they both used Instagram Live and delivered content in high volume, there remained a gap in the types of images and videos shared.

Rouhani and his supporters provided users predominantly with polished, professionally produced content, whereas Raeisi’s campaign was often more dependent upon crude (but not necessarily ineffective) activist-produced memes to drive home the campaign’s messages about economic mismanagement and corruption in the Rouhani administration.

In addition, the introduction of Instagram Live in November 2016 had notable impacts on the ways candidates campaigned, freeing them from the chains of state owned media institutions. This offered a golden opportunity to Rouhani in particular, who was vociferous in his criticisms of state broadcaster IRIB amid claims that the broadcaster censored segments of Rouhani’s official campaign video (the video in question referenced the house arrest of Mir-Hossein Mousavi, Zahra Rahnavard, and Mehdi Karroubi). At the same time, Raeisi frequently used the videos to attempt to connect directly with the young voters that were less reliant on IRIB for their news consumption.

We gathered 23,270 Instagram posts tagged with candidate names using the network analysis tool Netlytic. Although this methodology does not give us access to the entirety of the election-related content posted on Instagram, it provided us with a large and generally representative sample of the politically-engaged content on Persian-language Instagram. We engaged in in-depth image analysis of over 200 of the top Instagram posts, and content analysis of the captions and comments on the wider sample of 23,270 posts in order to help us understand the dynamics of the election as it was fought on Instagram, and to deepen our understanding of the practice of Iranian political communication on the platform.

At the same time, we were able to gather more than 13 hours of Instagram Live video published by the leading election candidates over the course of the campaign, by automating the recording of videos as they were broadcast. Amounting to nearly 94GB,


42 More information about our data collection methods are available in the Methodology annex of this report.
this data offers some insights into the ways leading candidates used Instagram to reach out to voters over the course of the campaign. The results were surprising. The vast majority of the sample were determined to be Raeisi supporters – 115 users to Rouhani’s 32 (with 99 neutral or indeterminate). However, this also confirms our hypothesis that conservative Iranian politicians have been working hard to professionalise their social media efforts, with both campaigns investing heavily in social media efforts over the election period.

### 3.2 Applying a Filter

**Analysing Election-Related Activity on Instagram**

To conduct our analysis of Instagram, we gathered a sample of posts from the election period and coded them on the basis of who the user supports, the type of image shared, the campaign issue covered, and the broad themes. The initial samples were taken from the 20 most-liked posts of the campaign. We subsequently focused our attentions on the 246 users who had shared at least 10 posts over the election period, and coded their outputs in detail.

3.2.1 Prolific Posters

**Active Content Producers on Instagram**

In this section, we’ll examine the output of the 246 active content producers in our Instagram sample who produced 10 or more posts over the election period. In this way we will gain insights into the key campaign issues being propagated by the most active and partisan activists, and thereby develop our understanding of the issues core to the election campaign as it was fought online.
3.2.1.1
Core Campaign Issues

The online political discourse carried forward many of the same messages that were advanced by the campaigns in their debate performances and rallies. At the same time, efforts were undertaken by the campaigns to drive up electoral participation among key demographics.

Rouhani’s camp made particularly intense efforts to drive up turnout among young people and reformist-leaning voters, and made a point of tying abstention – or a vote for Raeisi – with the loss of political and social freedoms. On the other hand, Raeisi’s campaign focused on a vote for Rouhani as a vote for continued economic stagnation and immorality in public life.

Within our sample, the biggest campaign issues were those relating to personal morality and character. Numerous images and videos were posted in which candidates and their surrogates attacked each other’s integrity, accusing them of deceiving the public and contravening the values of the Islamic Republic. One video illustrated the last four years of Rouhani’s administration, attributing various catastrophes to Rouhani’s personal shortcomings. Corruption – a central issue of the campaign, and of the televised debates – accounted for the third most-referenced campaign issue on Instagram. Most attacks on this front came from the Raeisi camp, which sought to undermine Rouhani’s campaign by honing in on corruption allegations made against his associates. Although Rouhani surrogates were less aggressive on this front, in the final days before the vote took place Rouhani’s campaign increasingly turned its fire on conservative elements of the establishment, including Raeisi and the IRGC.

3.2.1.2
Campaign Tone

Iranian elections have consistently been heated, and – as we’ve just shown – personal attacks comprised a significant proportion of election-related content on Instagram. 2017’s election was no different, with both camps seeking to reduce the credibility of the other.43

Whilst the majority of smears came from Raeisi’s camp, ranging from accusations of corruption against the Rouhani administration and his family members, to criticism of the administration’s efforts to tackle the economic stagnation of the country, Rouhani also fought back. Alongside attacking the IRGC, the last day before the vote took place saw him attacking Raeisi himself, targeting Raeisi’s failure to tackle poverty himself, referencing the large section of the economy he controls thanks to his position as head of Astan-e Quds Razavi.44 Astan-e Quds Razavi is a ‘Bonyad’, or charitable foundation that manages the Imam Reza Shrine, and owns numerous institutions and businesses. Although up-to-date figures are not available, Al-Monitor estimates that the conglomerate has an endowment in excess of $15 billion. Its utter lack of financial transparency has raised questions of financial impropriety.45

Within our sample, Rouhani-affiliated accounts waged a more positive campaign, with 62% of the sample taking a positive tone in posts. As the image of Zahra Nemati (who represented Iran in both the Olympics and Paralympics) illustrates [Figure 6], Rouhani made use of the popular support he had among celebrities and other popular personalities to spread his campaign message. On the other hand, Raeisi’s camp seemed intent on doing the opposite, with 61% of his sample partaking in political attacks.


against Rouhani and his followers. This matches how the campaign played out offline, with Raeisi and his followers, from the very start, attacking Rouhani’s character, his first term, and his supposed connections to everything from ISIS to the MEK.

### 3.2.1.3 Content Type

In our initial election coverage, our first foray into Instagram saw us conclude that whilst both camps took wholeheartedly to online campaigning on the platform, it was Rouhani’s camp that had taken a more professional approach, with Raeisi’s campaign relying primarily on ill-made memes to convey their messages.

On the whole, this conclusion still broadly holds true. Of the 115 posts that were linked to Raeisi, 48% consisted of memes, the biggest form of post from this camp. This compared to an even share of 39% for photos and 39% for memes from the Rouhani camp.

However, a more sophisticated approach to social media use, as conveyed by Rouhani’s campaign, does not necessarily equate to wielding more power online. In the West, much focus has been placed on the power of meme use by the alt-right, and also the impact that memes may have had on the 2016 US presidential election.  

Memes provide a quick, easy and anonymous way to spread messages and ideology, making them a key method of communication for those seeking to spread more unsavoury messages. This, in turn, fits in well with the methods of Raeisi’s online campaign, which as stated relied heavily on political smears as a means to attack Rouhani and his followers.

### 3.2.1.4 ‘Sockpuppet’ Accounts As Content Producers

Of the 246 users we looked at, 61 accounts had been deleted within two weeks of the election coming to a close. The timing of the disappearance of these accounts would immediately suggest that they were set up in order to promote their respective candidates. Although we no longer had

---


access to the images of the posts, we managed to code a number of them using the post description metadata that we had scraped. 84% of these 61 missing accounts were identified to be Raeisi supporters, suggesting that ‘sockpuppeting’ or election-related automation was more prevalent within the conservative camp than it was among Rouhani supporters.

The theme that recurred most frequently in this sample – appearing in 13 of the 20 posts – was the importance of going out and casting a ballot. These 14 ‘get-out-to-vote’ posts, 8 of which were pro-Rouhani, and 6 of which were pro-Raeisi, garnered 102,423 likes in total. Rouhani was particularly strong on this front, recognising that driving up voter turnout among young people was his best option for countering Raeisi’s populist tide. With a final turnout of more than 73%, Rouhani’s efforts appeared to pay off.

Although economy-focused posts only took two places in the top 20, these two posts still gathered 19,758 likes between them. Both of the posts were posted by pro-Raeisi accounts, which is unsurprising considering the focus that the Raeisi camp placed on the state of the economy under Rouhani’s administration. Although there was an expectation from the start that the Nuclear Deal would play a key role in campaign debates, the focus was instead turned to issues such as the economy, and the apparent failure to take advantage of the lifting of sanctions to improve where it stood.

A number of the most widely liked posts also lingered on issues of morality and character, accruing 4 places in the ranking, and a total of 19,625 likes. Given the significant levels of conservative engagement on the platform, and the Raeisi campaign’s propensity to launch...
character-based attacks against Rouhani, it is unsurprising that posts relating to morality made such a prominent appearance.

Although corruption featured heavily in the campaign as a whole, with conservatives pressing Rouhani heavily on his economic policies and the wealth of some of those in the administration, only three of the most popular posts referenced corruption allegations explicitly, totalling a number of 15,703 likes. The focus on getting people out to vote might suggest that both camps sought to use Instagram to drive up turnout and engagement, rather than to sway opinion among the politically polarised electorate.

3.3 The Talking Points
Examining Our Full Sample

As we’ve seen, Instagram emerged as a central platform for election-related chatter over the course of the election period. As has been the trend across all platforms, Rouhani dominated the conversation, with his mentions comprising just under 50% of all candidate mentions within our full Instagram sample. However, compared with their performances on Telegram and Twitter, the ‘outrider’ candidates Mir-Salim and Jahangiri performed rather well. Although conservative candidate Mostafa Mir-Salim occupied a rather marginal position in the race (securing 1.16% of votes nationally), he still managed to achieve more than 3,500 mentions during the election period.

Corresponding closely with both Raeisi and Rouhani’s offline campaigning, corruption was the most widely discussed topic on Instagram. Both camps exchanged barbs regarding ongoing corruption scandals, and during the televised debates Raeisi and (his soon-to-be running mate) Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf consistently accused Rouhani of complacency with governmental corruption and negligence towards poverty. Whilst many reformists demanded political and social freedoms, conservatives and hardliners claimed that they
would heavily increase payments made to the poor, and increase the construction of affordable housing.

Closely related to this, and with Rouhani’s opponents building their attacks on the basis of Rouhani’s economic achievements (or from their perspective, the lack thereof), it perhaps comes as little surprise that the economy featured as the second most talked-about campaign issue on Instagram. Interestingly, Instagram differs from the other platforms in that discussions around human rights were prominent. With Rouhani making a big deal of his Charter on Citizens’ Rights in the months building up to the election, this could explain its higher ranking among other issues.

3.4 A National Campaign
Instagram and Geolocation

Our research on the Persian-language Twittersphere reveals that the user base was divided between the Iranian diaspora and Iran itself. We were curious to explore the extent to which Instagram’s Persian-speaking community is rooted in Iran, or whether it operates as a ‘bridge’ between domestic users and influential political influencers based around the world.

Extracting the geolocations from the Instagram data we collected has allowed us to map out the origins of 1,645 posts. As visible in [Figure 13], there was a wide geographical spread of activity throughout the period, both inside Iran and internationally. However, the vast majority of locations that we gathered came from within Iran, with just 37 coming from outside of the country. This is in stark contrast to the findings of our 2016 research on Twitter usage, which concluded that a significant segment of the Iranian Twittersphere is comprised of diaspora-based users.

3.5 The Perils of Live TV
Instagram Live

Instagram Live videos comprised an important component of the candidates’ campaigns in this election cycle. Given the media monopoly enjoyed by state broadcaster IRIB, Instagram Live provided candidates with an easily accessible platform to share live video to the public without mediation or censorship.

Both candidates expressed frustrations with IRIB’s coverage over the course of the election campaign – Rouhani vocally criticised the broadcaster for censoring segments of his official

campaign video for referencing the house arrest of Green Movement leaders Mir-Hossein Mousavi, Zahra Rahnavard, and Mehdi Karroubi. 48
At the same time, Raeisi complained that IRIB was giving excessive coverage to his rival’s rallies during the run-up to election day. 49
Raeisi and Rouhani therefore both had motivations to embrace the opportunities presented by Instagram Live. But what kinds of content did they broadcast? And how was it received by the Iranian public?


We were able to gather more than 14 hours of Instagram Live footage from...
We analysed this data to gain insights into the types of content being prioritised, the levels of user engagement attained, and the types of discussions sparked in each video’s comments section. Here’s what we found:

**The Rouhani campaign** used Instagram Live most effectively, at least in terms of the numbers of viewers that videos attracted on a regular basis. The Rouhani campaign’s viewership repeatedly exceeded 10,000 in the closing days of the election, reaching a high of 48,200 viewers during Rouhani’s last rally on 17 May.

The Rouhani campaign also offered a greater diversity of content, broadcasting simultaneous livestreams of the IRIB-televised debates accompanied by sign-language interpretation for hearing-impaired viewers.

By and large, however, the Rouhani campaign’s account aired rallies by Rouhani and speeches from his surrogates. These broadcasts were generally met by positive feedback in the live comments section below: green and purple

---

**Figure 15** Comments in a Rouhani campaign video from 15 May expressing support for the incumbent – green and purple hearts refer to the purple of the Rouhani campaign, and the Green Movement that arose out of the 2009 post-election protests

**Figure 16** Supportive comments in a Raeisi campaign video from 16 May. The slogans include: ‘We love Raeisi’, and ‘Long live Raeisi and Ghalibaf’

**Figure 17** It is unclear whether all the commenters were genuine supporters, or members of campaign or state-supported ‘cyber mobs’. Two of these accounts are private and have low post counts, and a third has been deleted since the election.

---

50 Special thanks to Nilo Tabrizy at the New York Times for her assistance in gathering and cataloguing this data.
heart emojis typically flooded the feed, along with exclamations of support for Rouhani himself.\footnote{Purple is the colour of the Rouhani campaign, whereas green is associated with the Green Movement that arose in the wake of the 2009 post-election unrest.}

Interestingly a number of these Rouhani-supporting accounts lacked profile pictures, had low post counts, repetitive name formats (i.e. [firstname].[lastname].[numericalstring]), or were later found to be deleted after the election campaign – all potential indicators of bot or sockpuppet accounts. That being said, given widespread concerns around surveillance on social media platforms, it would perhaps be unsurprising to see many users opt for private accounts in order to prevent unwanted snooping from hostile state and non-state actors. Given the limitations inherent to investigating private accounts, we were unable to reliably ascertain whether some of the supportive commenters on Rouhani’s Instagram Live content were from fake, campaign-sponsored activists, or else were genuine supporters.\footnote{For an introduction to dummy accounts and ‘cyber mobs’ within the Iranian context, this interview with Berkman-Klein researcher Simin Kargar provides a useful entry point: Si, Jeanette, (2017), ‘Unstoppable Force, Immovable Object: Iranian Resilience in a Censored Society’, Medium, available at: https://medium.com/berkman-klein-center/unstopable-force-immovable-object-iranian-resilience-in-a-censored-society-688c73855e28}

The Raeisi campaign deployed almost as many live videos over the course of the campaign, but never managed to attain a viewership comparable to Rouhani’s. The most widely viewed video from the Raeisi campaign was broadcast from his rally in Mashhad on 16 May, achieving around 7,100 viewers at its peak. Again, feedback was generally positive in tone – there was little evidence of Rouhani supporters trolling his account.

A number of the accounts we identified as Raeisi supporters in these videos were found to have been deleted shortly after the end of the election campaign. Others have low post counts, lack profile pictures, and maintain private accounts. As stated above, such features are common to accounts of ‘cyber mob’ sockpuppeteers who have been directed to produce content for a particular end goal – work that is frequently coordinated by state and state-aligned actors.

Many Raeisi videos from earlier in the campaign failed to gain significant attention. Of the 11 videos that received less than 1,000 viewers at their peak, 8 were from Raeisi, 3 from Rouhani, and 1 from Ghalibaf. Raeisi’s videos also caught the attention of hostile trolls more frequently than Rouhani’s videos. On a number of videos, Raeisi’s comments feed appeared to be swamped by nationalistic trolls from Saudi Arabia. These users made posts in Arabic, and used crude emojis to insult Iranian viewers (including the poop emoji, various farmyard animals, dogs, and devils).

Interestingly, some (presumably) Saudi-sponsored activists seemed to take a particular disliking to Mexico, accompanying the Mexican flag emoji with poop and middle finger emojis (see Figure 18). Evidently, more training in green-white-red tricolore-recognition is required.

It’s worth noting that even minor candidates engaged with the public via Instagram Live. Jahangiri joined in late in the campaign, posting videos on 16-17 May and attracting more than 2,000 viewers to each. These videos – posted after Jahangiri stepped out of the campaign – show the politician speaking in support of Hassan Rouhani’s presidential bid.

It is of course important not to overstate the influence of Instagram Live during this election – many videos were only viewed by a few thousand people nationwide, and a not-insignificant number failed to even attain 1,000 viewers. But the spikes in viewership above 10,000 (with one video attaining nearly 50,000) in the closing days of the campaign are significant, and point towards the growing influence of Instagram as a broadcasting platform that can sidestep Iran’s existing media establishment.
3.6 Mass Production

Automation and Large-Scale Content Production

The level of spam on Instagram was higher than we initially expected. Although the MEK has failed to make significant, if any, progress on the platform, a steady flow of mass-produced content was being produced in bulk by both reformist and conservative accounts. Though we have not been able to analyse every instance of spam during the election period, we have put together a number of suspected spam accounts, and coded them according to who they support, and whether they appear to be automated bots, or have an element of human control.

3.6.1 Reformist Automation

@nedayeeslahat

This account (see Figure 20) ‘Neda-ye Eslahat’, or ‘Cry of Reform’ is a pro-Rouhani account. The account appears to be a largely automated bot account, based on the timestamps of its posts throughout the election period, in which it posted 52 times between 13 – 17 May. At one point the account was posting 7 posts within 40 seconds – an inhumanly speedy pace. That the account’s last post

Figure 18 A number of the users in this screenshot appear to be Saudi activists, insulting Iranian viewers while praising the Saudi establishment. Iranian users responded in kind.

Figure 19 Saudi activists seemingly had trouble differentiating the Iranian and Mexican flags.

Figure 20 Neda-ya Eslahat was a Rouhani-supporting election campaign account that produced vast quantities of pro-Rouhani content, and exhibited hallmarks of automation.
dates to 23 May also makes it clear that the account was set up purely to produce election-related content.

Based on our sample, there seemed to be relatively few automated or high content-producing accounts affiliated with the Rouhani campaign, perhaps reflective of the campaign’s confidence in organic content production and public engagement.

3.6.2 Conservative Automation

@Raisi_tehran
A pro-Raeisi account that was deactivated after the conclusion of the election campaign, and which was created to populate Instagram with a high volume of pro-Raesì content. Indeed, the account posted a total of 41 times over the four day period we examined. However, unlike some of the other accounts we have examined, the irregular timestamps of posts suggest that this was a sockpuppet account, with posts directed by a human user.

Although this account posted numerous times over the course of each day, outputs were irregular, and there were gaps of 7 or more hours of inactivity. Such gaps are consistent with the user’s likely sleeping pattern, according to Iranian local time, implying that the account was manually operated, and not automated.

@antitakhrir
This conservative account produced the highest amount of content of all accounts over the period examined, creating 89 posts in a 24-hour period on 14 May (see Figure 21). Again, the account is no longer active, having stopped posting on the day of the election.

The account criticised the Rouhani administration, accusing it of collusion with the US government, Israel, ISIS and the MEK. This account’s outputs also encompassed many of the attack lines we observed across online and offline conservative campaigns. These attacks were predicated on Rouhani’s economic performance, corruption allegations relating to Rouhani’s brother, and fabricated links between Rouhani and a number of extremist organisations.

Figure 21 Antitakhrib was a conservative, anti-Rouhani account that shared conspiracy theories and harsh criticisms of Rouhani’s record over the course of the campaign.
3.7 Conclusion
Picture Perfect

Iranian engagement with Instagram has surged. Whilst last year’s report into the Persian Twittersphere saw a mainly diaspora group of individuals as users, delving into Iranian Instagram has illustrated that the platform is much more representative of Iranian-based users. Whilst previously many politicians, particularly conservatives and hardliners, have failed to either make a presence on or even use of social media, politicians of all backgrounds took to Instagram to spread their campaign message.

And while both conservatives and reformists alike have jumped onto the Instagram bandwagon, there was a clear distinction in the methods both camps took to engaging with their user bases. Rouhani’s tactics consisted predominantly of professionalised content, providing users with crisp photography and videos, alongside relatively choreographed memes. Raeisi’s tactics differed somewhat, with the campaign deploying a high number of sockpuppet and bot accounts to distribute key images and messages widely - including a wider use of memes than Rouhani - and to inflate the metrics of support (i.e. likes) of Raeisi-aligned posts.

Our wider analysis of 246 posts conveys this, with the largest portion expressing support for Raeisi. On top of this, it became clear that the platform has been used as a means to encourage voters to go out and cast a ballot on election day. This in turn brought into question whether Instagram has really been used by politicians as a tool for communicating to their own supporters, rather than seeking to sway supporters from the opposing side of the political divide. Irrespective of this, it is apparent that the network has a far wider user base than its predecessors Facebook and Twitter, and is worthy of study in future electoral contests.

The adoption of Instagram and Instagram Live has helped to bring about a complete transformation of political campaigning strategies in Iran. Given the effectiveness of the platform, it will be interesting to see how Rouhani’s supporters and rivals continue to make use of the platform to advance and frustrate his agenda during his second term in office.
4
TELEGRAM
Telegram is the most widely-used messaging app in Iran, with more than 40 million users nationwide. Over the past two years, it has emerged as an important platform for the dissemination of news and all different kinds of digital media content. In this chapter, we’ll take a sample of content shared on the Persian-language Telegram network from between 14-26 May. We’ll combine this sample with content analysis of high-profile political Telegram channels to assess the nature of Telegram usage in Iran, and the effects of politicians’ engagements with the public.

Telegram has attained a level of influence incomparable to any of the state-restricted social media platforms that preceded it – the user statistics speak for themselves on this front. But very few studies have been able to gain insights into how political actors are benefitting from this. Has the rise of Telegram created a space for a truly diverse media ecology to emerge, empowering reformist voices that are otherwise sidelined in state media? Or have conservative efforts to capitalise on the platform’s reach allowed them to build an effective political communications infrastructure?

4.1 Tapping Into Telegram
The Challenges of the Platform

Telegram is unlike the other social networks featured in this report, in that it’s something of a hybrid between a traditional social media platform and a conventional messaging app. As such, particular challenges existed with regard to data collection. We worked with a social network analyst at the University of Vienna to undertake a scrape of 135 Telegram channels from an original test list of 126 – composed of popular election-related channels and the top channels taken from the Telegram channel ranking site Tsear.ch. We were subsequently able to gather 74,464 posts from the period 14-26 May.

We quickly realised, however, that the tool we employed was only able to sample a tiny fragment of Iran’s Telegram network, and so we are hesitant to read too much into this data about the nature and trajectory of Telegram usage in Iran. One of the key challenges arose with regard to identifying and indexing relevant political Telegram channels. The construction of our initial test list was undertaken by sampling of the top channels on the Telegram channel index Tsear.ch, in addition to a number of core election-related channels. However, this research method left us with a very high volume of apolitical content. As a consequence, our dataset revealed relatively little in the way of political chatter – for instance, the term ‘Rouhani’ appeared in only 1.37% of posts, and ‘Raeisi’ in 0.17%. This data was therefore not ideal for undertaking an election-focused analysis.

Instead, we decided to undertake case studies of key platforms identified during the election campaign in order to document the diverse array of communication methods being used by the campaigns and their affiliates.

More work needs to be undertaken to effectively map the structure and dynamics of Persian-language Telegram, and additional tools are required in order to adapt to the specific challenges of Telegram’s two-variant channels and group-based networks. Although on this occasion we were unable to undertake a network analysis to comprehensively describe the dynamics of Persian-language Telegram, we hope this report provides a valuable starting point in this effort.
4.2
A Captive Audience
Telegram’s Vast Reach

Although we were unable to gather particularly valuable data on the usage of Telegram through our network analysis, we were able to observe the behaviours of key campaign-affiliated Telegram channels throughout the election period. Particularly notable is the impressive reach afforded by Telegram, and the increasingly central role the service is playing in the political campaigns of both reformist and conservative politicians.

We also note how Telegram serves a function as a bridging platform between campaigns’ activities on other social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter. Although both of these platforms offer some advantages over Telegram in terms of content production, each lacks the captive audience that Telegram can provide.

On election day – May 19 – Rouhani’s official Telegram channel @rouhani96_ir enjoyed a healthy lead over the Raeisi campaign’s channel @raisi_org, with 479,000 followers to Raeisi’s 254,000. Both campaigns posted numerous times each day over the course of the election period, and both campaigns made posts that received in excess of one million total views in the final days of the campaign.

Given the astonishing reach of the campaigns’ Telegram channels, the manner in which content is deployed, and in which the electorate is influenced is of great significance. Let’s now turn to an investigation of some of the innovative tactics that were deployed.

4.3
Diverse Tactics
Political Campaigning on Telegram

The content being shared on Telegram was diverse in both format and content, and the campaigns and their supporters used the full range of Telegram’s capabilities in order to stimulate interest and inspire citizen engagement with the election. In this segment we’ll look at some of the methods deployed by the candidates and their surrogates, and demonstrate some of the ways that Telegram proved so effective as a mobilisation tool during the election contest – from the use of video campaigns, to data visualisations and automated campaign bots.

4.3.1
The Rouhani Campaign

@rouhani96ir

The Rouhani campaign’s operation on Telegram built upon the successful model developed by reformist candidates during the 2016 parliamentary elections. Distributing a rich variety of media content to users, the channel worked hard to mobilise followers to participate on election day, and communicate the achievements of Rouhani’s first term in office through images and data visualisations.
Alongside videos and images, the Rouhani campaign employed audio clips to share key passages of Rouhani’s campaign speeches (see Figure 24), and invited Telegram users to tune into announcements and campaign speeches broadcast on Instagram Live (see Figure 25).

The campaign grew heated in the final days of the race. The channel released a number of stylised quotes from Rouhani’s events in which he condemned Raeisi and the conservative establishment as ‘liars’ who had brought Iran to the ‘edge of the abyss’. This combative tone, in combination with his loud opposition to IRIB and the IRGC helped to mobilise reformist-leaning young voters who were wary of these institutions’ unchecked power and influence.

Interestingly, after the conclusion of the election campaign the @rouhani96ir Telegram channel was dissolved and subsequently reestablished, with the opening post being an invitation to submit feedback and comments to the new Telegram account @ersalnazar. Content from the previous version of @rouhani96ir was subsequently re-shared en masse, and the channel continues to be populated with fresh pro-Rouhani content. Notably, the recreation of the channel caused the follower count to drop from a high of around 479,000 followers on election day, down to just under 5,000 followers today.

4.3.2 The Raeisi Campaign

@raisi_org

The Raeisi campaign’s operation on Telegram was executed with a comparable level of professionalism to the Rouhani campaign’s efforts, and utilised a broad range of Telegram’s functionalities in order to provide followers with information, produce shareable visual content, and answer questions about Raeisi himself.

The imagery deployed by the Raeisi campaign in the closing days of the campaign emphasised the partnership between Raeisi’s religious credentials and good character, and the pragmatism and experience of his running mate – and former mayor of Tehran – Ghalibaf. The visual content produced, such as Figure 28, was polished and well-executed.

The Raeisi campaign was also slick in its communication of the candidate’s political programme. Among the videos shared on the channel was Figure 29, which was a two minute video highlighting a number of key pledges from Raeisi’s election manifesto, accompanied by friendly and well-produced animations. The pledges included a large-scale programme of house-building, a crackdown on corruption, and measures to address the widening chasm between rich and poor.

Figure 23 Stills from a video using data visualisations to argue that Rouhani’s administration has brought about economic improvements for citizens. The video concludes with the statement: ‘The choice is yours’

Figure 24 An audio extract from Rouhani’s campaign speech, delivered during his visit to Kerman

Figure 25 A notification to the campaign’s Telegram followers encouraging them to tune into Rouhani’s statement broadcast on Instagram Live

46
Figure 26 A quote from a Rouhani speech: “We have been told lies for years, and seen our motherland brought to the edge of the abyss. Today, our nation is not prepared to hear a new lie.”

Figure 27 The card displayed in the @rouhani96ir channel after the conclusion of the election, inviting followers to share their thoughts and feedback with the account @ersalnazar.

Figure 28 “Our promise: Wednesday in Holy Mashhad, Martyrs’ Square, 4pm”

In addition to videos of campaign rallies and events, Raeisi’s channel made short, shareable audio clips available of key passages in the candidate’s speeches. Users to tune into the livestream of a speech delivered by the candidate in the city of Semnan, thereby nudging his Telegram-based follower base towards his active Instagram account.

Like Rouhani, Raeisi also used Telegram to point followers towards content being produced on other platforms. In Figure 31, Raeisi’s channel instructs

- **Information**
  Information about Raeisi's policy positions on a host of issues, along with an index of the works he has published over the course of his career.

Raeisi’s official Telegram account also had an attached bot at @raisi_orgbot. The menu offered options including:
The deployment of bots alongside the Raesi campaign channel’s regular outputs demonstrates the

- **Biography**
  Information about Raesi’s background prior to launching his campaign.

- **Responding to Concerns**
  Link broken – presumably contained information to help Raesi supporters rebut concerns of Rouhani supporters about Raesi’s past record.

- **Social Networks**
  Links to the other Telegram and Instagram-based pages of Raesi and his campaign.

- **Supporter Profile Images**
  Applies a supporter banner to a user’s Telegram profile image.

- **Points**
  Allows users to examine the points they have accrued by inviting their friends to subscribe to the Raesi Telegram channel.

- **Working With Us**
  Allows users to register as volunteers with the Raesi campaign.

- **Suggestions**
  Provides users with the ability to provide feedback on the Raesi bot and the campaign itself.

**Figure 29** A video explaining Raesi’s policy programme point-by-point

**Figure 30** An audio extract from one of Raesi’s campaign speeches

**Figure 31** A notification pointing Telegram followers towards an Instagram Live stream of Raesi’s speech in Semnan

**Figure 32** A bot attached to the Raesi Telegram channel
4.3.3 Rouhani, Go!

@rohaniboro

It wasn’t just official campaign accounts that were waging sophisticated campaigns on Telegram, however. Supporters and affiliated channels also deployed imaginative tactics to rally supporters and propel their chosen candidate ahead in the online race.

‘Rouhani, Go!’ (or @rohaniboro) was one such account specialising in the creation and sharing of user-created images calling for Rouhani to be voted out of office for failing to address the myriad concerns of ordinary citizens. The channel was accompanied by a bot @rohaniboro_bot which distributed image frames allowing users to impose a ‘Rouhani, Go!’ logo on their own images (see Figure 31), which were subsequently re-shared by the ‘Rouhani, Go!’ Telegram account.

4.3.4 (Fake) Rouhani Bot

@rouhani96ir_bot

Conservative activists also deployed a few tricks over the course of the campaign in an attempt to sway soft Rouhani supporters. One technique deployed on Telegram on a handful of occasions was the creation of bots using handles that varied very slightly from official Rouhani campaign accounts. One example is the @rouhani96ir_bot which, although seemingly designed to be the official bot of the @rouhani96ir campaign account, was in fact host to anti-Rouhani content including cartoons and news from conservative news agencies. The bot also points users towards a Telegram channel containing Qur’anic citations and hadiths, alongside sports news and a channel sharing miscellaneous apolitical memes.

4.3.5 Rouhani Fans 1396

@HavadaranRohani1396

The group ‘Rouhani Fans 1396’ made use of Telegram in a more traditional manner to disseminate information about the upcoming election. This channel – seemingly maintained by an enthusiastic
Rouhani supporter – shared a mixture of campaign commentary, images, and supporter-produced memes with the channel’s followers.

The channel also reshared a number of striking data-driven images and visualisations. These included tables demonstrating the impact of Rouhani’s 2015 healthcare reforms, and how they reduced the cost of many treatments by a factor of 10 or more for average Iranian citizens (see Figure 39). Such graphics were effective: this one was viewed by more than 12,000 users – more than double the average of posts shared in the channel.

4.4 Telegram

Iran’s First Mass Online Public?

The reach of political Telegram channels is striking – official campaign channels were able to disseminate a wide selection of media content to hundreds of thousands of followers nationwide. Never before have political actors had such freedom to wage electoral campaigns with the ability to reach vast swathes of the population without the mediation of state organs such as IRIB.

Telegram is also interesting in the variety of engagement tools it offers – images, videos, audio, and even automated two-way engagement through Telegram bots. These bots...
were deployed in sophisticated manner by both the Rouhani and Raeisi campaigns, and their utility for sharing news, responding to questions, and helping supporters to become active campaign volunteers will likely prove even more influential in future electoral competitions.

For future studies, more effective methodologies need to be developed to undertake network analysis of Telegram. Although content analysis as performed here can reveal much about the methods used by campaigns and channels to attempt to influence public opinion, it is difficult to gain insights into the ways that users themselves engage with and reshare content. Given the central role of Telegram in Iran’s digital ecology, it is likely that researchers will have plenty of further opportunities to explore such questions in the months and years ahead.

Figure 38 A text-dense post reporting on a Telegram post made by Khabar Online’s political editor Mohsen Farjadi

Figure 39 A chart showing the difference in the cost of different medical treatments before and after the introduction of Rouhani’s healthcare reforms
CONCLUSION
ALTERED REALITIES
The 2017 presidential elections marked the first occasion that digital spaces constituted a primary battleground of an Iranian election, involving the active and sustained participation of both reformist and conservative political actors. Reformist politicians have long sensed the value of using social media to cultivate support among Iran’s relatively young and social media-savvy electorate, but this campaign marks the first point at which conservative politicians have constructed well-oiled social media campaigning machines.

The sheer size of Telegram and Instagram’s respective user bases make this phenomenon fundamentally different – and more impactful – than the stunted ascendance of Facebook and Twitter in Iran from 2008 onwards. Hundreds of thousands of citizens are engaging with politicians’ content on Telegram, while state broadcaster IRIB sits on the sidelines, powerless to reframe or mediate the words of Iranian politicians. This new unmediated politics has the potential to be bolder, more radical, and also more populist in character than that which preceded it. Rouhani’s largely unprecedented attacks on IRIB and the IRGC during the campaign demonstrate the power of free communications channels – such criticisms of the media establishment would not be possible unless alternative channels existed.

So where next for Iran’s social media ecology? Based on our findings, we have a few observations and predictions:

**Twitter**

In all, we observed little in the way of growth or increased user engagement on Twitter over the election period. As in our previous report, the platform still serves predominantly as an echochamber for reformists, an MEK botnet, and diaspora-based commentators. Conservative clusters of users exist, but are rather less engaged or active, and only a few high-profile conservative politicians continue to use the platform.

Although it appears to be maintaining its core user base, the astonishing growth of its rivals Telegram and Instagram has left the platform teetering on the brink of obsolescence. The lack of significant investment in the platform by either the Raeisi or Rouhani campaigns speaks to its marginal status in Iran’s digital media landscape, and to its limited utility as a political communications tool. In summary, Twitter’s most influential days are almost certainly behind it. Unless it can bring about a truly unprecedented explosion in its Iranian user base, then it will not be able to match the societal influence of Telegram and, to a lesser extent, Instagram. Although it performs a unique function as a hub for journalists and a bridge between leading diaspora and domestic voices, it lacks the reach and influence of the new kids on the block.

**Instagram**

The meteoric rise of Instagram in the past two years has been surpassed only by that of Telegram. The Rouhani administration’s defence of the platform from filtering (doomed ‘intelligent filtering’ mechanisms aside) allowed the platform to grow its user base unmolested, with the blocking of Facebook leaving it as the sole online space for Iranians to plaster with selfies and overexposed holiday pictures. But interestingly, in the absence of freely available spaces for online political expression, such as Facebook and Twitter, Instagram became a central election battleground. Newly introduced functionalities such as...
Instagram Live allowed Rouhani to take his messages directly to voters without the mediation of state broadcaster IRIB, and a mixture of professional images and videos and supporter-produced memes were powerful vehicles for political communication by the leading campaigns.

At the same time, bots and automation emerged as a key characteristic of political Instagram engagement. Many key dummy or ‘burner’ accounts swiftly evaporated after election day, with activists’ electioneering activities concluded. Such purposeful engagement on Instagram and other platforms is a trend we expect to accelerate in future electoral contests, and should serve as a focus of future studies.

The sheer reach of the two leading campaign accounts is perhaps the observation with the most significant consequences for the future development of political communications in Iran. Although discussions over Telegram’s fate appear to be ongoing as of late 2017, the platform is now effectively ‘too big to fail’, and it is increasingly unlikely that the government is willing to face down the public outcry and infrastructural nightmares that would ensue if the platform were to be permanently blocked. With such a large audience to hand, both conservatives and reformists have witnessed the potential of the platform to effectively bypass traditional media outlets and reach citizens who are otherwise disengaged from the Islamic Republic’s media ecology.

Telegram

A giant of communications in Iran, Telegram was undoubtedly the platform with the widest reach and the greatest levels of influence during the election campaign. The flexibility of the platform’s functionalities allowed campaigns to deploy some of their most sophisticated campaign models, including automated chatbots and polls, alongside professionally produced video and image-based content.

This election has been something of a turning point for conservatives’ perceptions of social media platforms. In the future, we expect conservatives to continue flooding these spaces with content, and to deploy more and more sophisticated measures to engage the electorate with their political messages.
Postscript – Unrest and Social Media Platforms

It’s been less than a year since President Rouhani secured his re-election last summer, but it seems fair to say that quite a lot has happened since then. It would be remiss of us to publish this report without a brief comment on the unrest of December 2017 and January 2018, and its implications for this research.

This report was originally completed in October 2017, two months before the temporary filtering of Telegram and Instagram during the unrest over the New Year period. Both platforms were blocked on December 31 — Instagram until January 4, and Telegram until January 13. As has been widely documented in media reports, both platforms were used to share videos and images from the nationwide demonstrations, and to coordinate and incite further protests. Once again, it appears that communications technologies have played a role in accelerating and facilitating the spread of organised political dissent in Iran.

Of course, analysts were wrong to describe a ‘Twitter Revolution’ in 2009, just as they would be to frame this as the ‘Telegram Uprising’ of 2017. We’d stress that unrest is not driven by technology – the eruption of anger over the New Year period appears to have been driven by continued economic hardship for those on Iran’s margins, frustrations at local mismanagement, and demands for accountability. But the pace at which protest-oriented Telegram groups such as Seda-ye Mardom grew in January really was astonishing – from zero to over 1,300,000 members within a week. Telegram is far more integrated into citizens’ daily lives than Twitter ever was, and it would not be an overstatement to describe it as the most powerful communications tool operating in Iran today.

That is why political actors of all persuasions hurled resources at the platform during the 2017 presidential elections, and that is why the tool was not blocked permanently in January 2018. Until a domestically developed app can prove as indispensable, we predict that Telegram will remain ‘too big to fail’. We wager that political leaders recognise that there would be too much disruption to business, to citizens’ everyday lives, and to mass communications generally to justify a permanent filtering of the platform.

As such, although this period of filtering demonstrates the state’s capacity to temporarily filter Telegram and Instagram, it also ultimately hinted at the state’s weakness in the face of the mass online public using these platforms. Consequently, we would predict that political elites of all political factions will continue to shift their efforts towards continued engagement with social media users, rather than long-term censorship of the platforms themselves.


Methodology

Twitter

The analysis of the electoral discussion on Twitter proceeded in three stages: first, data mining (data collection, cleaning and management); second, description of the network of users; third, a more in-depth investigation of the content of the discussions.

Step 1

Data Mining

Using the Twitter API we collected data from Twitter between 10-25 May 2017. To avoid selection biases and in order to offer a comprehensive understanding of electoral discussion and behaviour on Twitter, for our research design and data gathering, we used an inductive approach, i.e. instead of relying on pre-selected accounts, we attempted to observe a fullest possible picture of electoral discussion/behavior on Persian-language Twitter. We gathered all Persian-language tweets mentioning certain neutral Persian-language keywords relevant to the electoral discussion, including elections (انتخابات), votes (رای), boycott (تحریم), participation (شکت مشارکت), candidates (نامزدها), and the name of candidates participating in the presidential election.

Through this approach we reached Twitter accounts who involved in the electoral discussion on Twitter: i.e. Twitter users who posted at least one tweet relevant to the election over the course of the period under study. We also collected the attribute data of users involved in the discussion (user language; users follow/following counts; users’ like counts; users’ locations; verified accounts; etc.).

The 2017 election dataset consists of two sub-datasets: 1) the dataset of ‘tweets’ related to the topic and 2) the dataset of ‘users’ (Twitter accounts) engaged in the elections discussions. The ‘users’ dataset is structured into a network format based on retweets. This data was subsequently used for purposes of network analysis and visualisation.

Step 2

Network Analysis

In this stage, two datasets were analysed:

Mention/Retweet Analysis

Using Gephi software, a network analysis software, we first mapped the network of users on the basis of the ‘relational data’ (retweet data). Then, using a modularity algorithm, we attempted to detect and identify the main clusters within the network. In this case, links between nodes represent Twitter accounts retweeting each other.

Instagram

To gather Instagram data we used Netlytic, an online tool to gather data from different social networking websites such as Twitter and Instagram. We collected all tagged posts in Instagram with the three main candidates’ hashtags (ترکیب علی، رییسی، رئیسی) over the period of 11-18 May 2017. Netlytic captured and provided all posts published by public profiles, along with characteristics including the volume of likes and comments.

Telegram

Keyword Analysis

To carry out the keywords analysis, we compiled a list of words and topics that our expertise suggested were important within Iran. These topics included names of individuals that are well known within Iran, environmental issues, women’s rights issues, LGBT+ topics and phrases used by known trolls on other platforms, such as the MEK. We then placed these keywords into


our dataset, and counted how many times these words and phrases pinged.

Words were then categorised into topic areas as seen above, which included campaign issues, protest slogans and the most mentioned provinces.

**URL Analysis**

By collecting a list of the unique URLs shared on the platform, we analysed the most shared links, and established that looking in more detail at the YouTube links shared would give us a wider insight into the habits of Telegram users.

To analyse the YouTube videos shared, we coded them using a number of different categories: the actual category (politics, entertainment etc.), the video type (news, home-made etc.), and whether the video was pro/anti-Rouhani and/or pro/anti-Raeisi. From this, we pooled the results under their respective support headings, and established the categories of the videos.
• Ali Honari, (2015), 'Online social research in Iran: A need to offer a bigger picture', CyberOrient: The Online Journal of the Virtual Middle East 9.2
• Ali Honari, (2017), 'The Formation of Consensus in Iranian Online Communities', in S. R. Gordon (ed.), Online Communities as Agents of Change and Social Movements, pp. 165-194, IGI Global
• Babak Rahimi, “Cyberdissent: The Internet in Revolutionary Iran,” Middle East Review of International Affairs 7.3 (2003).
• James Marchant, Amin Sabeti, Kyle Bowen, John Kelly,


• Lamiat Sabin, “‘Rich Kids of Tehran’ are back on Instagram - but this time they’ve been forced to clean up their act”, The Independent 13/10/2014, last accessed: 21/06/2017, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/rich-kids-of-tehran-clean-up-their-online-act-after-iranian-government-pressured-instagram-account-9791049.html


• Mahsa Alimardani, Frederic Jacobs & Ellery Roberts Biddle, "New Research: Iran is Using 'Intelligent' Censorship on Instagram", Global Voices 07/05/2015, last accessed: 21/06/2017, https://advox.globalvoices.org/2015/05/07/new-research-iran-is-using-intelligent-censorship-on-instagram/


• Mikael Parkvall, "Världens 100 största språk 2007" (The World’s 100 Largest Languages in 2007), in Nationalencyklopedin

• Nasrin Alavi "We Are Iran" (2005)


• Noortje Marres & David Moats, (2015). 'Mapping Controversies with Social Media: The Case
for Symmetry', Social Media and Society, 1.2, pp. 1-17

ANNEX