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Iran activists work to elude crackdown on Internet

By REBECCA SANTANA (AP) – 7 hours ago

CAIRO — The tweets still fly and the videos hit YouTube whenever protesters take to the streets in Iran — even as the Internet battle there turns more grueling.

Authorities appear to be intensifying their campaign to block Web sites and chase down the opposition online, and the activists search for new ways to elude them.

Sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube remain blocked, as they have been since Iran's political turmoil began following the disputed June 12 presidential election. Internet experts believe the government is going further — including tracking down computers from which images and videos of Iran's protests are sent out to the rest of the world. Activists fear their every move online is watched.

"We are really worried about this. To protect myself, I just limit my posts on social networks, my tweets and also I deleted some parts of my personal blogs and my other notes on the Web," one Iranian who regularly sends tweets about the election turmoil said in an e-mail to The Associated Press.

Another said, "Every site where people can gather and stay connected and share news and pics ... is blocked." Both agreed to e-mail interviews on condition of anonymity, fearing government retaliation.

The government is believed to have been aggressively developing software and technology in recent years to strengthen its filtering and monitoring of Web sites. Since the election, a number of Internet experts are countering by providing Iranians with improved proxy systems and other programs to get around government blocks and escape detection.

"I think the Iranian government is learning quickly how to control and contain these things," said Andrew Lewman, executive director of The Tor Project Inc., based in Boston.

His group's free downloadable Tor program allows Internet users to work through a network of relays run by volunteers around the world to access blocked sites and hide what they are doing on the Internet. Active sessions using Tor in Iran have jumped from a few hundred before the election to thousands after, the nonprofit group said.

The Internet has been a key tool for Iran's opposition on two fronts. One is internal — to organize protests and exchange information. The other is external — to let the world know what is going on amid severe government restrictions that bar foreign media from reporting and taking pictures and video on the streets. The government has been actively trying to block online activists on both fronts.

Hundreds of thousands of Iranians held protests denouncing the election as fraudulent until security forces launched a heavy crackdown, arresting hundreds and killing at least 20 protesters. Throughout, activists took to the online messaging site Twitter to relay 140-character posts about what they were seeing and hearing. They furtively recorded video of police and members of the feared Basij militia riding on motorcycles through throngs of protesters, or photos of demonstrators bleeding from battles with government authorities.

One video in particular gripped Iran and the world: Images of 27-year-old Neda Agha Soltan bleeding to death after being shot on a Tehran street were viewed millions of times on YouTube, and her death became a rallying cry for opponents of the regime.

Even after the crackdown crushed the large protests, the Internet has remained key. In two smaller protests organized in recent weeks, constant tweets reported on where the demonstrators were gathering. Despite the restrictions, videos quickly emerged on YouTube showing thousands of protesters clashing with police and Basij. At the same time, Internet news sites have become vital for tracking arrests of opposition politicians and activists, who are often picked up from their homes far from scenes of protests.

During the height of the protests, authorities cut off cell phone service and text messaging — which are all run by state-run firms and through government-owned towers — to break up communications for organizing rallies. Phone service has returned, though it cuts off in parts of Tehran when authorities believe a protest will be held. Texting has been slower to come back and is sporadic at best.

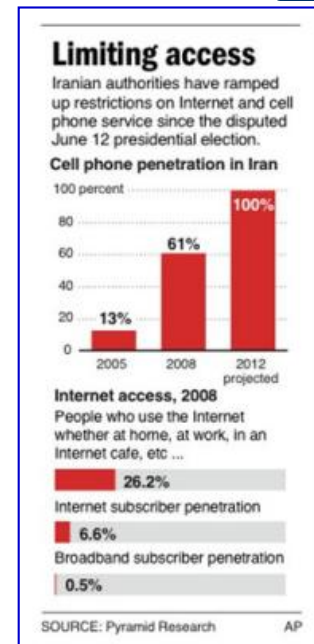
The government has also tried a more traditional route to subdue dissent: arrests. At least 34 journalists and bloggers were detained after the election, joining seven others already in prison, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Around a quarter of Iran's 65 million people are believed to have Internet access. Iran has long used filtering to restrict certain news and political or pornographic Web sites. But since the election, the number of blocked sites has increased.

Besides Twitter and YouTube, the BBC's Farsi-language news site is still blocked, and Web sites associated with opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi — who says he won the election — are constantly shut down. In the last week, two new Mousavi sites have been created after others were targeted.

The day after the election, Internet traffic in and out of Iran came to a near total stop, according to research done by Arbor Networks, a Chelmsford, Mass.-based Internet security company.

The cause is not known, but the group says one explanation could be that the state-run Internet company all but shut down the network so all traffic could be run through filtering programs, which can only handle limited volume. In the week after the election — the latest figures available — traffic picked up again to about 70 percent of normal. In Iran, the Internet remains slow because of the brakes on traffic.



RETRANSMITS graphic that moved June 18; graphic shows cell phone and Internet penetration in Iran

