Potential and pitfalls of covering news when access is denied: a case study from Iran

By Osamah Golpy

Contents

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of global journalism, the challenge of reporting from regions where access is heavily restricted or outright denied remains a significant concern.

The ability to gather, verify, and disseminate information from hard-to-reach places in 2024 is both more crucial and more challenging than ever. Countries such as North Korea, where the government exerts total control over all media; Eritrea, where independent journalism is virtually non-existent; and China, where stringent censorship and surveillance restrict access to sensitive regions like Xinjiang and Tibet, present extreme challenges for journalists.

Similarly, nations like Syria, where ongoing conflict and targeted violence against journalists make reporting life-threatening, and Iran, where the government imposes severe penalties on journalists covering human rights abuses or political dissent, exemplify the difficulties of covering news in authoritarian and conflict-affected regions.

This project explores the potential and pitfalls of covering news under such conditions. Using Iran as a case study, it will highlight how local journalists, digital platforms, and the diaspora community work together to overcome censorship and share critical information with the world.

We will then review how Iran's state media and four major international news outlets – BBC Persian, Iran International, VOA Persian, and Rudaw Media Network (my employer) – handled coverage of the helicopter crash that resulted in the death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on May 19, 2024.

By examining the various approaches taken by different news outlets, this project aims to provide insights into the broader implications of media coverage in authoritarian contexts and the enduring struggle for truth and transparency in regions where information is tightly controlled.

Iran's TV news media landscape

Decades of Western sanctions and widespread corruption have led to the decline of the Iranian economy, with its currency at its lowest recorded value in March this year. Yet, state media continues to showcase the "success" of the Iranian state.

Despite having a vast network of reporters, the state's portrayal of the country on television feels disconnected from the reality Iranians face. Manouchehr Afra, a poet from Western Iran, captured this sentiment in a spoken word performance on Instagram, where he wisely said: "Which should I trust, my TV or my refrigerator? The TV is full of bright images about the success of Iran, but when I open my refrigerator there is nothing."[1]

What it's like covering TV news in Iran

On 22 September 2022, the day before the new school year began in Iran, a demonstration erupted in Salmanshahr, a town in the northeastern part of the country. Among the travellers making their way through the area was Shirin Allizadeh, a 37-year-old bank employee, who was returning from a family holiday with her husband, their 7-year-old son, and a young couple.

As they drove through the chaotic scene, the sound of live gunfire pierced the air. Shirin, distressed by the violence unfolding, began recording the events on her mobile phone. Tragically, while recording, she was struck by a stray bullet in the forehead. Her phone continued recording, capturing the final moments of her life.

Four weeks later, Maryam Afshang, a BBC Persian journalist based in London, was on leave to celebrate her son's birthday when she received contact details from a source who had access to the video captured by Shirin Allizadeh. Faced with the gravity of the situation, Afshang cancelled her leave and returned to the office to report on yet another tragic event unfolding in her home country.

This wasn't the first time Afshang had been confronted with the emotional toll of her work. In 2022, following the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' downing of Ukrainian Flight 752, which claimed the lives of all 176 passengers, Afshang was

[1] Translated and paraphrased.

contacted by the grieving father of one of the victims. He didn't just send her one or two photos of his daughter – he sent hundreds. Each image was a testament to the vibrant life his daughter had lived and the future she had been denied. The father sought solace in sharing his loss with someone who could tell the world his daughter's story.

Afshang explained: "When families trust a journalist with their stories, that relationship doesn't end with the publication of the report. It often becomes a lasting connection, as if they've found someone to help them express their grief. For journalists, this relationship is complex – on one hand, we are dealing with grieving families, and on the other, these families are frequently under surveillance or even detained. We need to maintain contact for ongoing reporting, but it's a delicate balance."

Afshang, who has lived outside Iran since 2004, last visited the country before the 2009 Green Movement. She never anticipated that her journalistic work would prevent her from returning. However, the Iranian government's crackdown on Persian-language media post-2009, has made it impossible for her to go back.

In the autumn of 2022, Iran witnessed the largest anti-government protests in years, sparked by the death of 22-year-old Zhina Mahsa Amini while in the custody of the notorious morality police. Her arrest was reportedly due to a minor infraction—a slipped headscarf. This tragic event ignited the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement, a powerful uprising against state repression.

The first images of Amini on her deathbed were released by Kurdpa, a human rights organisation with a network of activists both inside and outside Iran. Shortly after, additional images from the hospital where she passed away, as well as from her funeral, were published by two local journalists. These journalists were soon arrested by the authorities, a clear attempt to silence those documenting the truth.

As state media intensified efforts to suppress news of the growing unrest, exile-based news channels began verifying and disseminating materials they received from various sources, including social media platforms. These independent outlets played a crucial role in ensuring the world learned about the protests and the state's brutal response.

TV news outlets in Iran

Obtaining reliable viewership data from Iran is challenging. However, in July 2024, a Dutch non-profit named the Group For Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (Gamaan), conducted an online survey of 38,445 people resident in Iran. Among survey respondents, UK-based Iran International and Manoto were the most popular channels, with reported daily viewership rates of 54% and 42%, respectively.[2] BBC Persian followed with 37%, while the state-run IRIB had a viewership of 36%.

Externally based Persian channels scored higher than state-run news channels in terms of public trust. Over half of the respondents expressed trust in Iran International, and 44% trusted Manoto. Although Manoto ceased its free-to-air broadcasts in January 2024, it continues to maintain a strong online presence through social media platforms. BBC Persian was considered trustworthy by 34% of respondents, while 57% reported having no trust in the state-run IRIB at all.

The survey also showed that 68% of respondents frequently use social media to access news and information about Iran and the world, 35% watch satellite television, and only 12% tune in to state television.

A previous survey, conducted by Gamaan in 2021, examined public perceptions regarding the political leanings of these news channels.[3] More than half of the respondents viewed Iran International and Manoto as biased towards those opposing the Islamic Republic of Iran, while less than a quarter believed BBC Persian shared this bias.

Despite being banned by Iranian authorities, BBC Persian is sometimes referred to by regime opponents as "Ayatollah BBC", accusing the channel of favouring the current regime. This suspicion is partly rooted in historical grievances, with some Iranians believing that the UK-based channel played a role in the 1979 overthrow of the US-backed Shah by broadcasting information about sit-ins and protest sites to the public.

---

[2] https://gamaan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/GAMAAN-Media-Survey-2023-English.pdf
[3] Gamaan, 2021. Iranians' attitudes toward media: A 2021 survey report. [online] Available at: https://gamaan.org/2021/04/05/iranians-attitudes-toward-media-a-2021-survey-report

Founded in 2017, Iran International is the only 24/7 Persian-language news channel based in London. A news article published by *The Guardian* claimed the channel received funding from Saudi Arabia, a claim which Iran International has denied. [4]

Despite being younger than its rivals, such as the UK-funded BBC Persian, a combination of Gamaan survey results and anecdotal evidence suggest Iran International has become a favourite among Iranians both at home and abroad.

Aliasghar Ramezanpoor, the executive editor of Iran International, explained that their success lies in their comprehensive coverage, which not only includes Iranian affairs but also world events of interest to their audience. He said the channel aims to "go beyond the state propaganda" and that their viewers trust the channel for providing truthful and wide-ranging news.

Iran International firmly believes that Iranian elections are neither free nor fair – a view shared by analysts including Freedom House.[5] Candidates are pre-selected by a powerful body influenced by the Supreme Leader. "[The regime] decides who to elevate, who to bring down, or even who to eliminate… it's always about the setup," Ramezanpoor said.

He argued that using the term "election" to describe the process of leadership selection in Iran was misleading and part of government propaganda. "If you call the process in the UK and France an election and use the same word for the process in Iran, it's a form of misinformation," Ramezanpoor concluded.

---

[4] Kamali Dehghan, S., 2018. Concern over UK-based Iranian TV channel's links to Saudi Arabia. The Guardian, 31 October. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/31/concern-over-uk-based-iranian-tv-channels-links-to-saudi-arabia

[5] In Iran, authorities defend an illegitimate election by suppressing online dissent (2021) Freedom House. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/article/iran-authorities-defend-illegitimate-election-suppressing-online-dissent

Newsgathering in restricted environments

In environments where press freedom is severely restricted, traditional methods of news gathering often give way to more innovative, yet perilous, approaches.

Journalists and activists must navigate a landscape where state surveillance, censorship, and the threat of arrest are ever-present. In Iran, where independent journalism is systematically suppressed, local news sources, human rights organisations, and digital platforms play a crucial role in ensuring that information reaches the public.

Consulting with local news

Smaller local news outlets are often crucial sources for understanding the nuanced realities on the ground, especially in regions where national or international media may have limited access or coverage. These outlets provide detailed and localized perspectives that are essential for capturing the full scope of events, particularly in areas where government censorship and control are strong.

Award-winning journalist and human rights activist Masoud Kurdpur lives in Bukan, in the West Azerbaijan province of Iran. There, he runs a digital platform called Mukrian News Agency, which reports in both Persian and Kurdish languages on human rights violations. His work is sustained by donations, but faces significant risks and pressures from the authorities.

Kurdpur has been arrested many times, and has endured long stints in prison. He was a teacher by trade until 2008, when he was imprisoned for "propaganda against the state". Going into exile has never been a consideration. "They always tell me to leave the country and then they will not care about my activities," he said during a phone interview. But Kurdpur said he would sooner face prison than leave his home country. The same is not true for all of his colleagues, some of whom have left Iran.

The authority's "push" message is not confined to journalists. Golshifteh Farahani, a prominent Iranian actress, now lives in Europe. She said the integrators who censored her appearances in cinematic works used to tell her: "We want all of you out, the actors and every one of you."

Kurdpur, who has been a journalist for over two decades, said the state media and the foreign channels have been more focused on national news than local news in the past. Focus shifted after the death of Zhina Mahsa Amini, and the protests that followed. Because Zhina came from a border area, far from the capital, and most of the protests and the crackdown that followed affected local areas – like Kurdish parts in the northwest or further south in the Sunni populated areas – foreign-based news channels strengthened their connection to local journalists and communities.

Authorities have shown more concern about the "domestic opposition" and activism, Kurdpur argued. He said putting an end to grassroots journalism would accomplish a primary part of their censorship mission.

He has noticed another change since the anti-government protests: heavy-handed security forces are more present on the streets, instilling fear. "The security forces are now out of their bases," he said. "It will take them years before they go back to their bases."

Reporting from border regions

When direct access to a country like Iran is denied, journalists often resort to reporting from peripheral border regions to gather information and meet with sources. In the case of Iran, Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey are two of the most strategic locations for this type of reporting, serving as vital entry points for Iranians who leave the country temporarily for tourism, commercial purposes, or other reasons. These border regions offer proximity to Iran while providing a safer environment for journalists to operate.

Networks already maintain a presence in these regions given their significance to regional geopolitics. Events in these areas often have direct implications for Iranian audiences and beyond. For instance, Iran's continued ballistic missile attacks on the Kurdish capital of Erbil in March 2022 and January 2024 were significant news events for these regions. Similarly, major occurrences like the Turkish presidential elections and the 2023 earthquake in Turkey drew substantial attention from both regional and international media.

Iraqi Kurdistan also serves as a base for many Iranian Kurdish opposition parties. Iran has accused these parties of instigating the protests that erupted after the death of Zhina Mahsa Amini, a claim that the opposition parties have consistently denied. In response to these accusations, Iran conducted drone attacks on

September 28th, 2022, targeting the Kurdish city of Koya, where these opposition groups are based. During one such attack, I was in Erbil training a new reporter and decided to take him to Koya to cover the unfolding military strike. It was there that I observed Iran International, a London-based Persian news channel, already actively reporting on the situation.

Aliasghar Ramezanpoor, executive editor for Iran International, said their assessment of both locations has since changed. "We do not have any reporters in Iraqi Kurdistan because of the security threat," he said.

The channel deals with many security threats: Pouria Zeraati, a prominent presenter for the channel, was stabbed in London in March this year, while the office had to be closed for seven months in 2023 due to a "credible threat" against its journalists by Iranian agents.

"It is not about 0% or 100% safety," explained Ramezanpoor. "It is about less safe and safer areas. The level of security and safety here in London or Europe is obviously better compared to what we could have in Iraq."

Using phone-in programmes

When the government tightly controls the flow of information, media channels based outside the country have developed innovative ways to engage with their audience and gather on-the-ground insights. One of the most effective methods has been the use of phone-in programmes, which allow citizens to share their views on current issues by phoning in live or sending audio recordings, which are then incorporated into video packages and broadcasted. The topics discussed can range from financial difficulties and social issues to political events like elections.

For many Iranians, participating in these programmes provides a rare opportunity to voice their opinions publicly, although it comes with significant risks. In rare cases, activists and lawyers sometimes take the risk to appear as guests. For example, local journalist Kurdpur was interrogated by security forces after appearing on channels like Rudaw and Iran International. Despite the dangers, he chose to speak freely on these platforms, knowing the importance of such contributions.

Similarly, Mr. Amini, the father of Zhina Mahsa Amini, engaged with multiple media outlets to challenge the state's narrative that his daughter died due to pre-existing heart conditions. Despite the risks, he spoke with Rudaw and BBC Persian to ensure

his daughter's story was heard, although the family later decided to limit further interviews to protect themselves.

Channels like VOA Persian have embraced this format with their daily programme, *Ru-ye Khat* (Straight Talk), which invites citizens to call in and directly share their perspectives on air. This programme fills a critical gap in news coverage by offering a platform for those inside Iran to communicate their experiences, especially when on-the-ground reporting is restricted.

BBC Persian also capitalizes on direct audience interaction through its digital media department. This team collects and curates user-generated content (UGC) from social media (see next section), incorporating it into their live and recorded news segments, particularly during significant events like elections. These efforts help to maintain a connection with the audience in Iran, providing them with a voice despite the oppressive environment.

Phone-in programmes and direct audience engagement serve as crucial tools for these channels, allowing them to gather real-time information and opinions from within Iran, even when direct reporting is impossible.

Gathering UGC: social media and telecommunications

Social media has emerged as a powerful tool for independent journalism and citizen reporting in Iran. Despite the government's attempts to suppress information, platforms like Telegram, Twitter, and Instagram have become essential channels for Iranians to share news, express dissent, and mobilise for protests.

According to Niusha Boghrati, the executive editor of VOA Persian, social media is nothing short of a "miracle" for independent media in Iran. With the population's high level of internet savviness, even in the face of severe restrictions, people continue to find ways to contribute to the flow of information.

Boghrati notes that Telegram alone had over 40 million subscribers in Iran at one point, making it a critical platform for communication. Social media allows for the dissemination of news stories that would otherwise be censored, enabling channels like VOA Persian to remain relevant and engaged with their audience.

However, when the government decides to take the extreme step of shutting down the internet, as it did during the "Bloody November" protests in 2019, journalists and citizens must rely on alternative strategies to keep information flowing.

What to do when the internet is turned off

In these "darkest of dark times," as Boghrati describes them, information still trickles out. Strategies for staying connected include:

1. **Use of satellite internet (e.g., Starlink):** Although initially limited, the availability of satellite internet services like Starlink has started to change the landscape. Device receivers have been smuggled into the country, and small batches continue to enter despite the risks. Satellite internet provides an alternative means of staying connected when terrestrial internet is cut off. One source told me he is aware of 1,000 Starlink devices already smuggled into the country.
2. **VPNs and proxies:** Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) have long been used by Iranians to bypass government censorship. While not foolproof and increasingly targeted by state efforts to block them, they remain a vital tool for accessing blocked websites and communicating securely.
3. **Offline sharing apps:** Apps that allow for offline sharing of data (via Bluetooth, for example), such as Quick Share on Android, can be used to distribute news and videos between nearby devices, even when internet access is restricted.
4. **Unregistered phones with no SIM cards:** Activists have begun using unregistered phones without SIM cards to avoid detection. Security services have used mobile signals in the past to track dissidents. These devices can be used to capture footage, and then transported to border areas where foreign internet providers are accessible, allowing for the uploading of critical information.
5. **Physical travel to border regions:** In extreme cases, individuals may travel to neighbouring countries like Iraq or Turkey, where they can access the internet to upload videos, photos, and news reports.

These strategies underscore the resilience of Iranian citizens and journalists in the face of government repression. Even when the internet is shut down, the drive to communicate and share vital information persists, ensuring that the world remains informed about events inside Iran.

For local agency editor Masoud Kurdpur, even if the state turns off the internet, it would simply mean reverting to the old ways of gathering and sharing information, as it was before the digital age. Phone calls, while seemingly convenient, carry the

risk of exposure since the state likely monitors them. As the Iranian saying goes, "walls have mice and mice have ears", meaning there is no absolute privacy.

Kurdpur is unfazed by the possibility of monitoring. When offered the option to remain anonymous during interviews for this project, he laughed at the suggestion. Having endured harassment and imprisonment, Kurdpur is used to the state's attempts to silence him. He believes his public profile, especially his recognition by international organisations like Amnesty International, offers him some level of protection. The last time he was imprisoned, he spent five months behind bars. He argues that the state risks damaging its public image if it were to keep him detained for too long.

Consulting with human rights organisations

Human rights organisations play a crucial role in documenting and disseminating information about abuses in regions where press freedom is heavily restricted. In Iran, where state repression is particularly intense in Kurdish areas, these organisations often become the primary sources of verified information, especially during periods of unrest.

[Kurdpa Human Rights Organisation](#) is one such organisation. They were the first to publish the images and video of Zhina Mahsa Amini, showing her broken body in coma at a hospital in Tehran. Spokesperson for Kurdpa, Awin Mostafazadeh, is based in Iraqi Kurdistan. She said the 2022 protests were an overwhelming experience for the organisation. "For the first time, we were the centre of news," she said. "[The media] wanted to check the news with us."

She said the verification process was intense: journalists wanted to ensure they had got the timing, the date, the place and authenticity of each bit of footage right. Now, the organisation is working to ensure they can receive and vet all activist information to meet those standards.

During protests, she said, they noticed authorities monitor mobile phone signals to discover the spots where the people have gathered. They advise local activists gathering evidence to use unregistered phones without installing any SIM cards. The material they gather can then be transferred by travelling to neighbouring cities for Wi-Fi, or cities on the border to use the foreign internet providers.

Farida Faramarzi, a human rights activist working for [Hana Human Rights Organisation](#), said it can take hours or even days to download videos sent in by the public when the state chokes internet speeds. However, unlike news organisation, human rights monitoring groups do not feel the same pressure to move fast and break news. Rebin Rahmani, from the [Kurdistan Human Rights Organisation](#) based in France, said, "We are not a news organisation. We do not have to publish the story the moment it happens. We do not have the time constraints. We prefer to be late and verify the story. It [has taken us] four days to verify a story."

The work of human rights organisations like Kurdpa, Hana, and the Kurdistan Human Rights Network underscores the indispensable role they play in a landscape where traditional journalism is often stifled by state control. By prioritizing thorough verification over speed, these organisations ensure that the stories of those suffering under repression are told accurately and with integrity. In doing so, they not only provide a voice to the voiceless but also challenge the narrative control exerted by oppressive regimes, making them vital allies.

Long-form follow ups

Although the 2022 protests were vast, authorities eventually used force to quell the widespread unrest by early 2023. However, the end of the protests should not signify the end of media coverage, as many stories remain untold and unexplored. In fact, slow and methodical verification and narrative-building may be an advantage under repressive conditions.

One of the most compelling documentaries on the unrest is Inside the Iranian Uprising, produced by Sasha Achilli and Majed Neisi and released 10 months after the protests.[6] The film follows three women activists in the diaspora who connected with sources on the ground through Zoom and other online tools. Achilli highlighted that this approach allowed them to bypass physical barriers and continue holding power to account.

In April 2024, nearly a year and a half after the disappearance and death of 16-year-old Nika Shakarami, a symbol of the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement, BBC Persian published [an investigative report](#) revealing for the first time that Shakarami

---

[6] Neisi, M., Allnutt, J., and Achilli, S.J., 2023. Inside the Iranian Uprising. [TV docu] BBC, 29 June.

had been sexually assaulted and killed by Iranian security forces.[7] The report, which relied on leaked documents that took months to verify, prompted the Iranian authorities to issue a statement denying the findings and summoning journalists and activists allegedly involved in the investigation.

---

[7] Hill, B., Miller, A. and Simkin, M., 2023. Secret document says Iran security forces molested and killed teen protester. BBC News, 30 April. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-68840881

The ethics of working with non-professional sources

BBC Persian, Iran International, and VOA Persian have stated that they do not employ paid reporters on the ground in Iran due to the significant dangers involved. Hiring people secretly could put them in grave danger.

Where sources would like to contribute materials to the news channels, the relationship is voluntary. They never "suggest" that they use special equipment like Starlink, a banned device in the country.

Unlike professional journalists, sources on the ground often lack the necessary safety and cybersecurity training to protect themselves. Journalists, often working from thousands of miles away, must take measures to shield their sources from exposure to authorities.

Blurring identifiable features
The most simple step: blur identifiable features, like faces and number plates, when putting together video packages with video content from social media or sources.

Roja Assadi, a BBC Persian journalist, works on the Digital Media desk, where she verifies materials received from ordinary people, human rights activists, and state media. She left Iran about 20 years ago, just before the 2009 Green Movement, unaware that her decision to work for BBC Persian would prevent her from returning. Assadi feels relatively safe in the UK because she works behind the scenes, unlike colleagues who appear on TV.

"We are here to provide accurate, correct, and honest information," Assadi stated. "Our job is not to be activists but to inform."

Rojda said sometimes when someone is taking a video from a window, if they suspect some parts of a building in the footage might help the authorities to figure out from where the video is recorded, they blur those too.

Informed consent

Journalists must ensure they obtain informed consent from their sources. This includes asking whether they want to be named or have their video or audio published.

Assadi explained: "You might see that the person is young, around 20 years old, in the middle of a protest with his friend having just been shot. He's filled with anger and excitement, wanting to act. In such cases, we approach with caution. Even if they say, 'we have no problem,' we discuss it internally with the editors. This person may consent to showing his face, but if we believe it could endanger him, I'm not comfortable publishing the video."

Don't make false promises

Documentary maker Achilli advised caution when approaching sources, warning against making false promises about potential positive outcomes from speaking to the media. She emphasizes that journalists are not social workers.[8]

A mother who lost her child and appeared in Achilli's documentary while still living in Iran decided to show her face and explained to Achilli, "We are volcanoes, we are erupting, and we have nothing to lose."

Similarly, Jiyar Gol, a BBC Persian reporter, met an Iranian father at a Berlin protest who lost three children in the downing of Ukrainian Flight 752. The father, who was returning to Iran after the protest, said he wasn't afraid to speak to BBC Persian because he had nothing left to lose: "I am a dead man walking."

Acknowledge and credit work accurately, when safe to do so

Human rights organisations are essential to the news cycle, often serving as the first data point for unfolding stories. Activist Faramarzi from Hana expressed frustration that their hard work sometimes goes uncredited. "It takes time to verify a story," she said. "But when you send it to a news organisation, they may publish it under another organisation's name."

---

[8] Reuters Institute, 2023. Documenting distance: Iranians' uproar over the death of Mahsa Amini. [online] Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/calendar/documenting-distance-iranians-uproar-over-death-mahsa-amini

Verification

Tools and techniques of verification are constantly changing along with the technology used to capture and distribute content. Consult helpful resources, like [this list](#) maintained by Meedan, for the best ways to document and verify materials. [9]

Be honest and explicit with your audience about what you've been able to verify. In one instance, BBC Persian could confirm the location and that security forces were using live bullets, but they couldn't verify the exact date and time of the video. Assadi explained, "When we published the video, we mentioned in the caption that we couldn't determine the precise date and time it was recorded. We're clear with our audience and openly state when we're unsure."

---

[9] See: https://www.gazamediaresources.com/

The perils of distance reporting

In the words of [Philip Gourevitch](#), a journalist for the *New Yorker*: "Being [on the ground] brings everything to one's work that one can't achieve at a distance – you have to see a place, walk around in it, touch it, smell it, feel its changes directly, you have to go into people's homes to understand them ... you cannot seriously report on life without going to where it is lived.

He continued: "It's really simple – if you're not there you're not reporting a place, you're reporting about the way some people who may or may not be there are talking about a place." [10]

There's little room for such idealism when you are banned from entering the country. BBC Persian was founded 15 years ago, and many of its journalists have been barred from returning home for their work. The constant fear is that the longer they are away, the less familiar they will be with the reality on the ground.

Nazila Fathi, an Iranian journalist who was forced into exile in 2009, wrote that she feared getting "[the exile syndrome](#)": that her perspective of Iran "would be frozen in the moment of leaving". Instead, she has found that through the global reach of internet, good networking skills, and a wide pool of sources back home, she has maintained her perspective. [11]

Maryam Afshand, from BBC Persian, agreed. An increasing social media presence allows her to see lived experiences on the streets of Tehran and other cities. This, coupled with talking to relatives and sources daily, helps journalists maintain a fair understanding of what life looks like in Iran. "I have been reporting on Iran every single day. I do not feel out of touch. I am not a normal immigrant; I am a journalist," she said.

Her colleague Assadi, however, mentioned she had been taken by surprise by the bravery of the younger generation in 2022. To be fair, even long-time residents said

---

[10] Reuters Institute, 2010. Are foreign correspondents redundant? [online] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/are-foreign-correspondents-redundant

[11] Fathi, N., 2010. The tragedies behind the Iranian crackdown. The New York Times, 17 January. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/17/weekinreview/17fathi.html
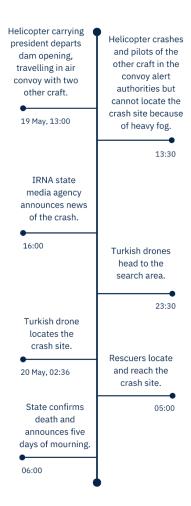
they were shocked by the passion with which young people protested. "With Gen Z, if I did not follow their social media, if I did not follow their Instagram, if I did not follow the news, I would have no idea what was happening in Iran. I have my vision of 20 years ago. It is always an issue because you are not on the ground. You do not know what their problems are."

How major news outlets fare:
a comparative analysis

My first notification that Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's helicopter had experienced a "hard landing" on the weekend of May 19, 2024, came from the BBC. The notification prompted me to check various news sources, including Iranian state media, Persian channels based outside of the country, and English-speaking channels.

My initial reaction was one of scepticism – I suspected the Iranian state already knew the full extent of what had happened but had chosen to delay communication. Iran has a term for the news coming out of the state during an emergency: they call it a "drip". The news comes in small pieces of information and slowly.

According to state media reports, the crash that resulted in the death of President Raisi, his foreign minister, and several other officials, occurred around 13:30 local time. However, authorities were unable to locate the crash site and recover the bodies until around 05:00 the next day.

Timeline (right column):

- Helicopter carrying president departs dam opening, travelling in air convoy with two other craft. — 19 May, 13:00
- Helicopter crashes and pilots of the other craft in the convoy alert authorities but cannot locate the crash site because of heavy fog. — 13:30
- IRNA state media agency announces news of the crash. — 16:00
- Turkish drones head to the search area. — 23:30
- Turkish drone locates the crash site. — 20 May, 02:36
- Rescuers locate and reach the crash site. — 05:00
- State confirms death and announces five days of mourning. — 06:00

The slow nature of the rescue operation shaped the outcome of the coverage. It left news channels to look into the unfolding situation from different angles, including speculation about whether it was an accident or not. "The difficulty with reporting on an incident like this in Iran is that we are reliant on information being released by a number of semi-official news agencies," said Sebastian Usher, BBC's Middle East Analyst.[12] "Those agencies don't always speak with exactly the same voice. You will see officials quoted, but quite often those officials will be at odds in what they say."

---

[12] BBC News, 2024. Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi killed in helicopter crash, 19 May.
https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/world-middle-east-69035051

The table below gives a comparative analysis of how five news outlets covered the death of President Raisi in the 48 hours following the crash. It examines six key elements of coverage: access to information, narrative and tone, use of expert analysis, visuals and sources, focus of coverage, and interaction with the audience.

Comparative analysis: coverage of President Raisi's death

Element	State Media	Iran International	BBC Persian	VOA Persian	Rudaw
Access to information	Direct access to official sources, monopoly over rescue visuals	No reporters on the ground, relied on state media visuals, external networks	Banned from reporting in Iran, used state media sources, external expert analysis	Relied on state media and external networks, similar to Iran International	No restrictions on broadcasting international agency materials, interviews with Iranian officials in Kurdistan
Narrative and tone	Nationalistic, focusing on unity, mourning, and heroism	Critical, highlighting Raisi's controversial past, speculation on foul play	Balanced, cautious in speculation, focused on verification	Balanced but with activist commentary celebrating Raisi's death	Regional focus, Kurdish perspective, neutral, fact-based
Use of expert analysis	Minimal, relied on official statements	Heavy use of exiled journalists, political analysts, aviation experts	Included aviation experts and foreign analysts, cautious approach	Included expert analysis with a stronger editorial tone	Focused on regional expertise, involving Kurdish representatives
Visuals and sources	Exclusive visuals from the crash site and rescue operations	Used state media visuals, combined with social media dissent	Used state media visuals, cross-verified with external sources	Similar to BBC Persian, with additional UGC from Iranian citizens	Used a wider range of visuals, including international agency materials and public reactions
Focus of coverage	Unity, national mourning, official narrative	Raisi's controversial history, potential foul play, succession speculation	Factual reporting, verification, regional stability	Social and political implications, factual reporting, activist commentary	Kurdish perspective, regional implications, factual analysis
Interaction with Audience	Vox pops showing public mourning, no real engagement beyond narrative	Engaged via social media, reflecting dissent and celebration	Interaction via social media analysis, reflecting diverse reactions	High audience engagement through UGC, reflecting public sentiment	Interviews with officials, public reactions, reflecting both official and public perspectives

In the following pages, we will delve deeper into these elements, exploring the nuances of each outlet's coverage and the broader implications for media reporting in restrictive environments like Iran.

State media

As previously discussed, the state and semi-state media outlets have a monopoly over the flow of information in Iran. Iranian state news agency IRNA announced the crash. They were the first to report the news, and almost the only ones on the ground to provide some visuals of the rescue operations, and of the nation "praying" for the president. The were also first to confirm the death of the president and his companions.

Their version of the story changed several times. Different state channels claimed the Iranian officials aboard had been able to make phone calls following the crash, only to then be denied by other officials.

One theme that continued to feature was how "united" the Iranian people were behind their "beloved" president. State television aired vox pops of people in different cities and from different walks of life who were shocked and wished the president a healthy return. Calls for prayers continued to increase especially after the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei told the nation to pray for their president, but also reassured them the state's business continued as "normal" and that "no disruption" was expected.

State TV broadcast images of official responders, including the Red Crescent and security forces. It also reported that "ordinary people" – locals, motorcyclists and offroad enthusiasts in the mountainous region – had teamed up to search for the president, suggesting this was proof that the state and citizens were on a united patriotic mission to find the "servant" of the people.

When state media announced the death of the president, it was a statement full of praise of the "martyred president" who died while serving the nation. It also chose to say it was the Iranians who found the crashed helicopter, omitting that a Turkish drone had provided location information to the rescue teams on the ground.

Iran International

Reporting of the crash by Iran International was the most glaringly different to the state line. The London-based, privately-funded Persian news organisation is

regarded as an enemy of the state by the Iranian authorities. One of its flagship anchors said "we are all happy" the Iranian president is dead.

The TV station does not have reporters on the ground inside the country – at least not officially. It broadcast in-studio coverage while making use of visuals made publicly available by Iranian and Turkish sources. Throughout the coverage, they had at least one reporter in the studio telling the people what information they had gathered from the state media, the authorities and from international reactions. It relied on a network of reporters based in the Middle East and elsewhere, such as the United States, to gather new information.

It also used social media posts showing the Iranians at home and abroad who were happy to see the president dead, even while the rescue operation was still ongoing.

Ebrahim Raisi has long been accused of being a prominent member of the 'death committee' responsible for the execution of thousands of political prisoners in late 1988, particularly in Iran's notorious Evin Prison in Tehran and Gohardasht Prison in Alborz province. In May 2018, he defended this chapter of his life as "one of the proud achievements of the [Islamic Republic] system".[13]

Iran International, like other foreign-based Persian channels, ensured the voices of relatives of those victims were given platform during their coverage. Raisi was portrayed as an abuser of human rights who became a public prosecutor in his 20s and denied fair trial to his victims. This contrasted with state media who portrayed the president "beloved" and missed by the people.

Raisi was also president during the 2022 protests, so the channel gave platform to victims of the Women, Life, Freedom movement.

Perhaps the most prominent theme of the hours-long coverage was the idea of who would replace the Supreme Leader, now that the favourite choice was dead. It tapped into speculation about whether the crash was intentional and whether Mujtaba, son of the Supreme Leader, was behind the incident; this despite making it crystal clear that Raisi was a puppet and obedient to the Supreme Leader.

---

[13] https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/4314/2021/en/

With no reporters on the ground, the channel relied heavily on guest experts to provide the context to the coverage. These included exiled journalists, experts on Iranian politics and public policy, and of course people who witnessed the decades-long rule of the Iranian regime, especially episodes that featured Ebrahim Raisi.

One category of guest to raise the most suspicion over official accounts was aviation experts, some of whom were retired officers who had the expertise to analyse the safety standards and the protocols for transporting the president from one location to another. The coverage questioned why authorities failed to capture the GPS signal, and why they could not locate the place even though the authorities claimed they held mobile phone calls with the people on board following the crash.

As soon as the death was confirmed, the channel played a recorded package that reviewed the last hour of Raisi's life. The package compared the president to his Quranic namesake, Ibrahim (a prophet spared from the fire by God), and noted that the president had not been spared the fire.

In subsequent days, Harfe Akhar, a current affairs programme on Iran International, dedicated several episodes to the helicopter crash. In one episode, the presenter said the death of the president "is a piece of news that made all of us happy this week".

He also hosted a political analyst in their London studio to analyse the incident. The guest said they did not have "definitive" evidence to know what happened, to which the presenter responded they would continue "based on the assumption" that it was intentional. Among those who might benefit from the death, he named Iranian domestic rivals, Israel, and Russia.

Asked about these incidents, Iran International said the programme was a chat show rather than a news bulletin, which meant there was leeway for the presenter to express views that do not necessarily reflect the views of Iran International.

BBC Persian

BBC Persian, also headquartered in London and banned from reporting in Iran since its foundation in 2009, started to report the helicopter crash as breaking news shortly after 4pm. It used visuals and information provided by the state media. It also hosted a range of expert guests, including people with aviation backgrounds.

As the coverage continued, a news anchor was joined by two London-based reporters in studio to feed in what they were learning from their sources. One of the reporters was dedicated to sharing updates from social media channels. This included reaction from both pro-regime people lamenting the death, and anti-regime people who were celebrating.

During the rescue operation, Iran made formal requests to other countries to help with the operation including from Europe and Turkey. Ankara deployed Baykar's advanced Bayraktar Akıncı drone. It soon shared footage that claimed to show the crash site, a claim that was refuted by the Iranian authorities.

Although the BBC Persian channel first stated the Turkish drone had found the location, it later used its own verification process to conclude the location shared by the Turks was 6 kilometres away from the crash site. It also ran an investigative segment citing drone experts. It concluded that it is more likely the improved weather conditions coupled with the land rescuers helped find the exact location.

The channel also noted on more than an occasion that the Turkish drone drew the crescent and star of the country's flag on its return from the mission.

Iran has dedicated cybersecurity policing to monitor the social media platforms and the digital presence in the country. BBC ran a segment about those who had been cautioned by the police unit after sharing footage that showed their happiness at news of the president's death.

VOA Persian

The Washington-based channel did not differ much from its British counterpart. Their coverage ranged from state media monitoring, interviewing experts, reviewing social media materials, and receiving updates from their network of reporters outside of Iran.

Masih Alinajad, an anti-hijab activist and journalist who hosts the channel's Tablet current affairs programme, said: "I cannot hide the smile on my face [...] the death judge, the execution judge, is dead." She went on to say the world was "a little bit" happier that week.

Tablet is a show that addresses social and political issues by inviting viewers to share their own footage. This episode showed people celebrating the death of the

president. She said the people "have millions of cameras" in their hands and, via the videos captured, "show the hope they have, despite being hurt" by the regime. VOA Persian ran a disclaimer on screen during the programme stating that "the views expressed are personal and do not necessarily represent the views of the VOA".

Rudaw

Rudaw Media Network, my employer, is an Erbil-based news channel that broadcasts in Kurdish language, with digital platforms in English, Turkish and Arabic. It is the biggest Kurdish news organisation in the region. Because I was in Oxford at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, I did not take part in the coverage of the helicopter crash.

Rudaw's coverage started with breaking news of the crash and continued for about two hours, sharing updates and visuals sourced from Iran state sources. It then began hosting guest experts to weigh in on the crash.

Unlike BBC Persian, VOA and Iran International, who do not have the right to broadcast materials produced by international news agencies who operate in Iran, Rudaw does not have the same limitations. It was therefore able to run a Vox Pop of the Iranian people showing their reactions to the news of the crash.

The channel hosted Iran's Consul General to Erbil to discuss the incident, and also the Kurdish representative to Tehran. Iranian officials are barred from speaking to the foreign-based Persian channels and therefore the other channels did not have the same opportunity to interview Iranian officials.

Conclusion

In the ongoing battle between state-controlled narratives and independent journalism, this analysis of Iranian news coverage highlights several challenges and opportunities that are sadly relevant for journalists in repressive environments around the world.

We have seen how local journalists, international news outlets, and digital platforms collaboratively work to break through censorship and deliver critical information to global audiences.

We have also seen how the ethical responsibility of journalism is magnified in this environment. When state narratives dominate and independent reporting is suppressed, the role of the press becomes not just to inform, but to uphold the integrity of the truth.

In such contexts, taking the "high road" is essential. The celebratory tone adopted by Iran International and VOA Persian regarding President Raisi's death – not just in reporting that some were celebrating, but celebrating themselves – while resonating with some audiences, raises ethical concerns. Such extreme positions can undermine the credibility of journalism, especially when impartiality is needed to maintain trust.

This project underscores the need for ongoing reflection on how journalists can navigate these challenges while adhering to the highest standards of their profession. Other questions remain: how do we effectively verify the truth in environments where access to information is tightly controlled? Traditional verification methods, such as direct observation and interviewing witnesses, are often impossible. Instead, journalists must rely on a combination of digital tools, crowd-sourced information, and collaboration with human rights organisations and local activists to triangulate data and cross-check facts. Yet even these methods have limitations, and the risk of spreading misinformation remains high.

These questions point to the need for continued research and exploration into the strategies that can be employed to safeguard press freedom and ensure that the stories of those in repressive environments are heard.

The struggle for truth and transparency is far from over, and as censorship techniques evolve, so too must methods for overcoming them. The importance of resilience, adaptability, and international support cannot be overstated.