



A tricky time for the truth

Challenges for information platforms operating in authoritarian contexts

The case of Persian Wikipedia in Iran

A tricky time for the truth

Information platforms increasingly face **challenges** related to the risk of being implicated in **human rights violations** when operating in countries that restrict internet freedoms, as the case of **Persian Wikipedia** in Iran shows.

In 2019, an estimated 1,500 Iranians were killed by the Iranian government in the nationwide ‘Bloody November’ protests.¹ Iranian officials publicly admitted to their involvement in suppressing the protests, including Kioumars Heidari, Commander of the Iranian Army’s Ground Forces.² Two years later, in September 2021, Heidari’s Persian Wikipedia page was updated with references to his own public statements about his participation in suppressing the protests. The new content was deleted in less than an hour and, following repeated attempts to re-upload the content, at least seven more times by Persian Wikipedia user ‘Armiiran’.³ Armiiran’s Wikipedia history shows edits exclusively to pages about the Iranian army and its leaders. Ultimately, the content on Heidari was removed by a Wikipedia administrator for the following reason: “Fake and false news is forbidden”.⁴ The very same Wikipedia administrator has deleted content alleging human rights violations on at least seven Iranian officials’ pages. At the time of publication of the present paper in January 2024, the content on Heidari is up again, but it has been posted and removed more than ten times, highlighting a risk and a challenge for information platforms such as Wikipedia.

Responsibilities and risks of “information gatekeepers”

One of the most challenging issues associated with digital information and communication platforms is their unprecedented and rapid growth, often exceeding initial expectations. Consequently, some of them have transformed into colossal entities that have a much more significant impact on people than originally envisioned or planned. These platforms wield substantial influence on the daily lives of billions, gaining control over specific aspects of personal and social life, at times surpassing the influence of governments.

Some digital platforms – such as Wikipedia – have evolved into major gatekeepers of information and communication, virtually dictating public knowledge. Information absent from Wikipedia is perceived as non-existent, remaining outside the realm of common knowledge. Although Wikipedia may not have initially aimed to replace physical public spaces or dictate the world's shared knowledge, its miraculous growth and popularity have inadvertently bestowed similar functions upon Wikipedia, leading to a regulatory dilemma.

On one hand, these platforms assert their status as private businesses, conducting activities aligned with their initial business models and adhering to regulations governing private enterprises. On the other hand, the impact of their activities has transcended the realm of mere business entities, granting them regulatory power over the free flow of information and communication. In essence, while their organizational identity has remained consistent, the nature and scope of their organizational impact have significantly evolved.

Examining Wikipedia, we observe the Wikimedia Foundation's (WMF) steadfast public commitment to preserving an “open” model of content moderation by refraining from interfering in the collective governance process led by the community of users. This approach is owed, in part, to the nature of the relationship between the Wikipedia contributors as the quasi-owners of the platform and the Foundation, a non-profit public charity, as the host and support unit. However, for a platform such as Wikipedia, as one of the foremost sources of global common knowledge, this open and decentralized model of content moderation bears clear and significant risks of capture by state-sponsored and

non-state-sponsored actors who seek to drive disinformation campaigns or engage in censorship.

Occurrences such as the one mentioned above related to Kioumars Heidari and the Persian Wikipedia user ‘Armiiran’ have prompted human rights groups to raise concerns about a network of pro-Iranian state administrators seeking to control Persian Wikipedia content in order to spread misleading or false information, promote Iranian state propaganda, and attack political dissidents. The potential manipulation of Persian Wikipedia content reflects a broader discussion about the responsibilities of online platforms to avoid infringing on digital freedoms and aiding human rights abuses. These platforms have an unparalleled ability to contribute to realising human rights by enabling access to information. However, if they are not careful, they can create or exacerbate social and environmental harms by facilitating online disinformation and persecution of human rights defenders and advocates. In these discussions, much focus has rightly been on for-profit social media companies.⁵ However, irrespective of their business model, all online platforms have a responsibility to respect human rights according to the international standards set down in the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) and OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises (OECD Guidelines). These standards require social media and information platforms to conduct human rights due diligence⁶ (HRDD) to avoid infringing on or being linked to violations of internet freedoms⁷ and avoid propagating misleading or false information.⁸ They also call on companies to publicly communicate about their HRDD and provide sufficient information “to demonstrate [to stakeholders] the adequacy of their response to the particular human rights impact involved”.⁹



Former Wikipedia steward Mohsen Salek (middle) at a 2018 event on “the application of Wikipedia techniques in communication”, hosted by Persian Wikipedia and the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

In 2019, the journalism platform *OpenDemocracy* published an investigative report about the possible influence of the Iranian state on Persian Wikipedia.¹⁰ Subsequently, in 2019 and 2020, Justice for Iran (JFI) and the Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (SOMO) investigated further and communicated the concerns about Persian Wikipedia and the need for HRDD with the Wikimedia Foundation (WMF), the non-profit organisation of which Persian Wikipedia is a project. WMF responded by launching an internal investigation into these concerns.¹¹ This discussion paper examines the findings of JFI & SOMO's investigation as well as subsequent measures taken by WMF to improve its compliance with international standards for responsible business conduct. While these improvements represent a step forward, challenges remain for WMF, and the paper concludes with a number of recommendations to WMF and similar information platforms to better align their practices with international human rights standards.

Persian Wikipedia's struggle with Iranian state interests

Wikipedia, "the free encyclopedia", has a global reach and "strives for impartiality, neutrality, and reliability of the information on its web pages".¹² Content is uploaded to Wikipedia by users from across the globe, and the platform utilises a complex hierarchical system granting different levels of access and tools to classes of users, including "administrators", "bureaucrats", and "stewards", all of whom are "elected" by peers and who participate as volunteers.¹³ Wikipedia "administrators" have "exclusive access" to several tools that allow them to carry out functions such as page deletion, page protection, blocking and unblocking users, and the ability to edit fully protected pages.¹⁴ Administrators are responsible for judging the outcome of discussions that require technical controls, such as content deletion.¹⁵ Wikipedia "bureaucrats" are "exceptionally trusted editors" who have the ability to perform specific actions on other users' accounts.¹⁶ The most far-reaching level of access and control is granted to Wikipedia "stewards", "a small group of trusted users" that have "complete access to the [global] wiki interface", including the ability to modify local and global user rights.¹⁷ WMF itself claims to be "quite removed" from the selection of individuals in these special user classes, which is done democratically.¹⁸

For Farsi-speaking users, including users in Iran, WMF hosts Persian Wikipedia. Human rights activists and defenders have highlighted what often appears to be systematic censorship and editing of Persian Wikipedia by the Iranian government and the spreading of disinformation on the platform.¹⁹ The Iranian government is one of the most egregious violators of internet freedoms in the world.²⁰ According to the human rights organisation Article 19, Iranian authorities engage in censorship, monitoring, and interference with the rights of individuals who speak or act against the regime with the ultimate goal of promoting and consolidating state-sanctioned ideological content online.²¹

Some Persian Wikipedia stewards, administrators, and bureaucrats have been reported to have close ties with the Iranian government, including state ministries and security and intelligence forces. For example, in 2019, an article in *OpenDemocracy* identified Mohsen Salek, known on Wikipedia by the username 'Mardetanha'²² as being a former Wikipedia steward based in Iran.²³ *OpenDemocracy* reported that on 11 September 2018, Mr. Salek spoke at a public

event jointly hosted by Persian Wikipedia and the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance on “the application of Wikipedia techniques in communication”. At this meeting, the issue of the protection of the personal pages of Iranian government officials from coordinated “attacks and campaigns” by so-called “troublemakers” was raised, to which Mardetanha is reported as responding, “We lock the pages and we do not allow such attacks”.²⁴ In an email response to a draft version of this report, a WMF representative noted that “stewards are not supposed to grant or change user rights on wikis where they are an active member of the community. One of the current stewards is a Farsi speaker, and I believe that steward would be prohibited from implementing bureaucrat or other user rights for the Farsi-language”.²⁵ At the time, Mardetanha was one of only 36 Wikipedia stewards worldwide, though he has since been removed by the WMF Legal department (see below).²⁶

Another example is the Iranian Wikimedians User Group, a reportedly “independent group of Wikimedians” serving as “the regional affiliate for Iran”.²⁷ The Group is comprised largely of Wikipedia administrators and bureaucrats and frequently organises events with the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance,²⁸ as well as events that are sponsored by and promote companies controlled by the IRGC,²⁹ Iran’s most powerful military and security entity and a designated terrorist organisation.³⁰

WMF investigation of the Iranian state’s influence on Persian Wikipedia

In October 2019, JFI brought the issue of Iranian government influence on Persian Wikipedia to the attention of WMF. In an email to WMF’s board members and in a public statement, JFI called on WMF and Persian Wikipedia to undertake serious HRDD to ensure that an authoritarian state like Iran was not using Wikipedia as a tool of censorship, suppression, and impunity.³¹ In response, WMF claimed that it had opened an investigation, but it did not provide any details on the findings or any actions it had taken to address the issue.³²

In 2020, while conducting research for the present paper, SOMO and JFI requested further information from WMF on its investigation into the potential state capture of Persian Wikipedia, as well as its HRDD processes. The authors extensively engaged with WMF on these issues over the course of more than a year. The following summarises the investigators’ findings as well as statements made by WMF throughout this process.

At the time of JFI’s initial request in 2019, WMF claimed that its standard investigation procedure involved an investigator from its Trust & Safety team reviewing all the evidence provided by outside parties and consulting with third parties, including volunteers and external experts selected at the investigator’s discretion.³³ In relation to the issues raised by JFI, the investigator consulted with experts on Farsi Wikipedia.³⁴

WMF never responded to JFI’s request directly, but in response to a draft version of this report, WMF claimed that its investigator had concluded in 2019 that there was “inadequate evidence for the [Wikimedia] Foundation to take action” but that there was in fact “visible bias” in the information on Persian Wikipedia.³⁵ According to WMF, the investigator found that this bias was “likely due to a combination of factors including the fact that the project is smaller and receives

less international traffic than English language, [and] the fact that the bias appears to exist in Farsi language sources on certain topics compared to English language presentation of the same material”.³⁶ According to WMF, the investigator also found that “a small percentage of Farsi language editors appear to have pro-Iranian government viewpoints generally” but that “it was not possible to determine that any of these individuals were connected to the government as opposed to organically holding those viewpoints.”³⁷

With regard to Mardetanha’s comments about ending “attacks” on Iranian government officials by “troublemakers”, WMF suggested that the steward may have misrepresented his role.³⁸ WMF also indicated that it was common for volunteer editor groups to organise meetings with local partners, such as that organised by Iranian Wikimedians User Group, which co-hosted and co-branded with the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.³⁹

Wikimedia ultimately concluded that Persian Wikipedia is currently “experiencing challenges” but that those challenges did not appear to amount to “project capture” or significant control of the local community and content, as has sometimes been the case on some Wikipedia pages.⁴⁰ Despite this conclusion, and despite Wikimedia’s claim that the investigator found inadequate evidence for action, Wikimedia took the rare step of removing Mardetanha as a steward in September 2021.⁴¹ Wikimedia did not communicate the reasons for Mardetanha’s removal, but Mardetanha told SOMO that he was removed as a steward by Wikimedia because of a change in Wikimedia policy stipulating that “people from certain countries such as China, Iran, etc., can’t be stewards”.⁴²

Wikimedia claims improvements to human rights policies and practices

Following the engagement with JFI and SOMO, Wikimedia claimed that it took steps to improve the integrity of Persian Wikipedia and to implement some of the recommendations made by JFI and SOMO. Wikimedia claimed that it has also expanded its Persian language investigation capacity to support community self-governance better.⁴³ However, neither JFI nor SOMO were included in or consulted on these steps.

In late 2021, Wikimedia published its first human rights policy, though it similarly did not consult JFI or SOMO in doing so.⁴⁴ The policy expresses Wikimedia’s commitment to protect and respect all internationally recognised human rights in accordance with the UNGPs. The human rights policy also acknowledges the risks associated with developing, operating, and supporting digital platforms, and it commits Wikimedia to conduct ongoing HRDD, including periodic risk assessments and meaningful engagement with rightsholders and their representatives.⁴⁵

WMF claims that it has expanded its internal expertise on the human rights impacts of its platform. In 2021, Wikimedia established a new human rights team focused on upholding and defending the safe contribution of the movement’s volunteers and hired a Vice President for Global Advocacy to lead the Foundation’s efforts to promote policies that advance an online ecosystem that upholds human rights.⁴⁶

In July 2022, WMF published its first Human Rights Impact Assessment (HRIA).⁴⁷ The HRIA does not contain much specific information on risks in Iran, but it does make some recommendations related to harmful content on the platform and

Harassed for speaking out against Persian Wikipedia

In January 2020, long-time Persian Wikipediaian 'AnuJuno' participated in an event for the 16th anniversary of the platform. One month later, AnuJuno left the platform, later explaining his reasons for doing so in a comment on a Persian Wikipedia discussion page. AnuJuno warned that after his identity was compromised at the anniversary event, articles that he had written about political prisoners and the 2019 protests were traceable to him, and he began receiving threatening messages and calls from Iranian state security forces. He was forced to leave his home and go into hiding to avoid further harassment.

AnuJuno made several allegations against Persian Wikipedia, including collaboration between some Persian Wikipedia administrators and Iranian security and intelligence organisations, the protection of Persian Wikipedia articles favourable to the Iranian regime, and organised attacks on Iranian dissenters' pages. He also described the spreading of mass, state-sponsored disinformation about the suppression of the deadly 'Bloody November' protests in Iran.

AnuJuno also mentioned two complaints against WMF, one filed by the families of those killed in the November 2019 protests, and the other filed by Persian Wikipedia users against administrators' attempts to silence dissent on the platform.

In response to AnuJuno's revelations, those Persian Wikipedia administrators – whom AnuJuno had named as collaborators with the Iranian state – banned him from the platform and deleted his comment.



Wikipedia projects deemed to be at “high risk of capture or government-based information.” The HRIA also recommended the establishment of a Content Oversight Committee to “review content with a focus on bias and have the ability to make binding editorial decisions,” and it made recommendations in relation to prevention and responses to harassment.⁴⁸

WMF also claimed that it has sought to address the risk of disinformation on its platforms by dedicating additional resources and a new team to countering disinformation and proposing effective policies and internal strategies to address the impacts of disinformation campaigns.⁴⁹ WMF also added a Farsi speaker to its Trust & Safety team in 2023.⁵⁰

Ongoing challenges for Persian Wikipedia

Despite WMF’s recent measures to address human rights risks associated with Persian Wikipedia and its Wikipedia platforms generally, recent research shows that significant challenges remain for Persian Wikipedia.

JFI’s investigation into the matter corroborates many of AnuJuno’s allegations, which are similar to the concerns JFI raised in relation to Mardetanha. Instances such as the AnuJuno case and the removal of unfavourable content, such as that on Kioumars Heidari’s Persian Wikipedia page, are just two examples of disinformation on the platform. JFI has documented how a large network of Persian Wikipedia users actively censors and removes factual content on the platform, particularly reports of corruption by Iranian state officials and their involvement in severe human rights violations. JFI concludes that the Iranian regime is utilising user-generated censorship as a proxy method to remove undesirable content about its officials’ role in human rights violations and to spread disinformation about political dissidents and civil society.

Further, many of the problems raised in JFI’s 2019 letter have not been resolved. There continue to be significant deficiencies in the Farsi version of Wikipedia pages, as well as Farsi content guides and policies. In general, Farsi guides and policies broaden the scope of impermissible content on Persian Wikipedia pages, and some remove significant reliability requirements. For example, the page on reliable sources is omitted from the Persian Wikipedia style guide.

Finally, despite commitments to improve engagement and communication with stakeholders, WMF continues to face challenges related to transparency and disclosure of its specific HRDD actions. For example, in response to JFI’s and SOMO’s request for information about how it addressed the adverse impacts and risks caused by the Mardetanha situation, WMF was unable to provide any verifiable information about the investigation it claimed to have conducted or meet the OECD Guidelines’ standard of “sufficient to demonstrate the adequacy of the response to the particular human rights impact involved”.⁵¹

Recommendations for Wikimedia and other information platforms

- Social media and information platforms must uphold human rights in line with international standards (UNGP and OECD Guidelines).
- Information platforms operating in contexts with higher risks to internet freedom should heighten their Human Rights Due Diligence (HRDD) procedures for identifying and addressing these risks.
- Wikimedia should continue to move toward alignment with international normative standards on human rights by further strengthening and implementing human rights policies and procedures, including those recommended by the 2022 HRIA.
- Regular communication with the public, and in particular with affected rightsholders and stakeholders, about risk identification and mitigation is crucial for information platforms' legitimacy and for meeting the expectations expressed by international standards on due diligence, which insist that the disclosures should be sufficient to demonstrate the adequacy of the response to specific human rights risks and impacts. In this vein, Wikimedia should enhance communication with local stakeholders, particularly in the case of Persian Wikipedia, to better address risks and challenges.
- It is possible to take measures to protect individual users' safety while still acting in accordance with international human rights standards for transparency and disclosure.
- Countering disinformation on Wikimedia platforms, especially non-English ones, should remain a priority for Wikimedia.
- Accuracy and quality standards for sourcing information should be maintained across Wikimedia's various Wikipedia language pages, content guides, and policies, and improved where they fall short, such as is the case with Persian Wikipedia.



Endnotes

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- 2 “Iran Army Commander Admits Role in Suppressing November 2019 Bloody Protests”, Iran International, March 12, 2021, <https://old.iranintl.com/en/iran/iran-army-commander-admits-role-suppressing-november-2019-bloody-protests>.
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- 5 See, for example: United Nations General Assembly, Human Rights Council, ‘Disinformation and Freedom of Opinion and Expression: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Irene Khan,’ April 13, 2021, A/HRC/47/25, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G21/085/64/PDF/G2108564.pdf?OpenElement>.
- 6 OECD Guidelines, Chapter II (General Policies), article A10: “Enterprises should: ... Carry out risk-based due diligence to identify, prevent and mitigate actual and potential adverse impacts and account for how these impacts are addressed.
- 7 OECD Guidelines, II (General Policies), article B1: “Enterprises are encouraged to: ... Support, as appropriate to their circumstances, cooperative efforts in the appropriate fora to promote Internet Freedom through respect of freedom of expression, assembly and association online.”
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- 9 OECD, 2018, “Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Business Conduct,” <http://mneguidelines.oecd.org/OECD-Due-Diligence-Guidance-for-Responsible-Business-Conduct.pdf>.
- 10 S. Zekavat, “Persian Wikipedia: An Independent Source or a Tool of the Iranian State? Is Iran Catching Up with the Trend of Censorship Outsourcing and Using Persian Wikipedia Towards this End?,” openDemocracy, September 11, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/persian-wikipedia-independent-source-or-tool-iranian-state/>.
- 11 M. Divsalar, “The Curious Case of Persian Wikipedia: Is the Iranian State Influencing Content?,” Zamaneh Media, October 17, 2019, <https://en.radiozamaneh.com/29790/>.
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- 13 Wikipedia, “User access levels,” last edited August 24, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:User_access_levels.
- 14 Wikipedia, “User access levels,” last edited August 24, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:User_access_levels. In response to a draft of this paper, WMF stated: “Users with roles such as administrator or bureaucrat have additional technical powers on the projects, but do not have special editorial authority. Their roles are to be used only according to community policies (determined by consensus discussions among the volunteers) to combat things like spam and vandalism. Editors with these roles do not have any special privileges or control with regard to article content. [...] Administrators should not be viewed as users of a higher rank or station than other users [...] Further, it is possible for any admin to undo an admin action by any other admin, so someone misusing the tools would not be able to make their viewpoint stick effectively”. WMF emails to SOMO, January/February 2021.
- 15 Wikipedia, “User access levels,” August 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:User_access_levels.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Wikipedia, “Stewards,” February 2021 <https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Stewards#Membership/>.

- 18 WMF email response to SOMO, 12 February 2021. In response to a draft version of this paper, WMF stated: “Generally speaking, volunteers have to meet a series of rigorous criteria in order to become stewards on Wikimedia projects, including successful election by the global editor community as a whole. These criteria are meant to limit candidates to those who have demonstrated a record of good faith, productive contributions to Wikimedia projects and earned trust by their peers.” WMF email response to SOMO, 13 November 2022.
- 19 S. Zekavat, “Persian Wikipedia: An Independent Source or a Tool of the Iranian State? Is Iran Catching Up with the Trend of Censorship Outsourcing and Using Persian Wikipedia Towards this End?,” *openDemocracy*, September 11, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/persian-wikipedia-independent-source-or-tool-iranian-state/>. Additionally, the Twitter account @wiki_news24 has for years documented organised acts of censorship, biased edits and deletion of Persian Wikipedia content: https://twitter.com/wiki_news24.
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- 22 Wikipedia, “User:Mardetanha,” last edited 3 November 2021, <https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:Mardetanha> (14 September 2022). SOMO contacted Mardetanha through his Twitter account (@Mardetanha) to verify his identity and allow him comment on a draft of the sections of this paper in which he is mentioned. On 19 September, 2023, Mardetanha replied and consented to the use of his name based on the previous public reporting in *OpenDemocracy* and *Radio Zamaneh*.
- 23 S. Zekavat, “Persian Wikipedia: An Independent Source or a Tool of the Iranian State? Is Iran Catching Up with the Trend of Censorship Outsourcing and Using Persian Wikipedia Towards this End?,” *openDemocracy*, September 11, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/persian-wikipedia-independent-source-or-tool-iranian-state/>.
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- 25 WMF email response to SOMO, 12 February 2021. This assertion appears to contradict the comment by Mardetanha that “we” prevent “attacks” to certain pages by “troublemakers” (implying that Mardetanha was involved in such actions), suggesting that Mardetanha may have overstated his role/authority.
- 26 WMF, telephone call with SOMO and JFI, 8 July 2022. In response to this, Mardetanha replied to SOMO through Twitter on 19 September 2023, that he was removed as a steward by Wikimedia because of a new Wikimedia policy stipulating that “people from certain countries such as China, Iran, etc, can’t be stewards”.
- 27 Wikipedia, “Iranian Wikimedians User Group,” last edited 18 January 2022, https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Iranian_Wikimedians_User_Group.
- 28 For example, their events often incorporate a banner carrying the emblem of the Ministry: see <https://evand.com/events/wikiconf2019?icn=organizer&ici=3> (accessed September 14, 2022).
- 29 For example, on 16 January 2020, Iranian Wikimedians User Group held an event sponsored by and promoting Mobin Net Telecommunication Company (MNTC), one of the largest internet providers in Iran and owned by Etemad Mobin Consortium, which is itself partly owned by the IRGC. See <https://evand.com/events/wikipedia16#event-cover> (accessed September 14, 2022). For links between the IRGC and Etemad Mobin Consortium see: A. Alfoneh, “The Revolutionary Guards’ Looting of Iran’s Economy,” *American Enterprise Institute*, June 23, 2010, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-revolutionary-guards-looting-of-irans-economy/>. In a response to a draft version of this report, WMF stated: “It is quite common for various volunteer editor groups around the world to hold events to help educate people about Wikipedia, with support from sponsors, and attendance

- at such events has not historically created problems for the Wikimedia projects”. WMF email response to SOMO, 26 January 2021.
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 - 32 M. Divsalar, “The Curious Case of Persian Wikipedia: Is the Iranian State Influencing Content?,” Zamaneh Media, October 17, 2019, <https://en.radiozamaneh.com/29790/>.
 - 33 WMF email response to SOMO, 17 February 2021.
 - 34 WMF email response to SOMO, 18 February 2021.
 - 35 WMF email response to SOMO, 17 February 2021.
 - 36 WMF email response to SOMO, 18 February 2021.
 - 37 WMF email response to SOMO, 18 February 2021.
 - 38 In an email response to a draft version of this report, WMF stated: “[S]tewards are not supposed to grant or change user rights on wikis where they are an active member of the community. One of the current stewards is a Farsi speaker, and I believe that steward would be prohibited from implementing bureaucrat or other user rights for the Farsi-language”. WMF email response to SOMO, 12 February 2021. As previously noted, this assertion appears to be contradicted by Mardetanha’s comment that “we” prevent “attacks” to certain pages by “troublemakers”, suggesting that Mardetanha was involved in such actions.
 - 39 WMF email response to SOMO, 26 January 2021; see also https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Iranian_Wikimedians_User_Group.
 - 40 WMF, telephone call with SOMO and JFI, 8 July 2022; WMF, “Croatian Wikipedia Disinformation Assessment-2021,” last edited 25 April 2022, https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Croatian_Wikipedia_Disinformation_Assessment-2021. In an email response to a draft version of this report, when asked about the details of these “challenges”, WMF stated: “We cannot speak to the specifics of individual investigations or cases in order to respect the privacy of individual volunteers. However, our 2020 human rights impact assessment identified government surveillance, requests for user data, and censorship, as well as project capture, as key risks that can have a negative impact on our community members’ freedom of expression, privacy, and other human rights. Such risks are particularly salient in contexts like Iran.” WMF email response to SOMO, 13 November 2022.
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 - 43 WMF, telephone call with SOMO and JFI, 8 July 2022.
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 - 46 WMF, telephone call with SOMO and JFI, 8 July 2022.
 - 47 Article One and WMF, “Assessing the Human Rights Impacts of Wikimedia Free Knowledge Projects,” https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/66/Article_One_Wikimedia_Foundation_July_2020_HRIA_%28English%29.pdf, July 2022.
 - 48 Ibid. See in particular pages 11 and 12.
 - 49 WMF, telephone call with SOMO and JFI, 8 July 2022.
 - 50 WMF, response to SOMO and JFI, 5 November 2023.
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Colophon

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Challenges for information platforms operating in authoritarian contexts

The case of Persian Wikipedia in Iran

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Justice for Iran (JFI)

Justice for Iran (JFI) is a London-based human rights NGO which aims to hold the perpetrators of serious human rights violations, including but not limited to crimes against humanity, torture, enforced disappearances, war crime and genocide which have been committed in Iran or by the Iranian officials, accountable. JFI focuses on the right to truth for individual victims and the whole society, and pursues right to justice for those who belong to the most marginalised groups such as women, ethnic and religious minorities, LGBTIs and political dissidents.

<https://justice4iran.org/>