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CS285L - Section 01 – Professor Potasznik

CS285L Final Paper: Article Version

The internet is a valuable medium of information; it has a presence in academics, business, and communication. It is a major component of modern life, and without it you would be disconnected from a large part of society. When such a powerful tool exists, governments in certain regions try to control it; this often leads to a power imbalance between the citizens and their authority figures. The problem with one entity controlling the internet is that they can dictate who has access to the internet and what information they can view on it. This raises the question: is it ethical for a government to have absolute control over their nation's internet? This very issue is currently plaguing the country of Iran. I will be assuming the role of an Iranian citizen and analyze the possible options in response to the government's actions.

On November 20, 2019, BBC news reported on an Iranian internet blackout that had been going on for four days at the time of the article's release. When the price of fuel suddenly increased, citizens in Iran protested, and in response, the Iranian government issued a nationwide internet blackout (Totten, 2019). Iranians perceived the government's actions as censorship – a punishment for the protest. The blackout has caused international concern, especially when a sudden drop in internet traffic was detected in the region. Before discussing the stakeholders and the ethics involved with the decisions taken in this situation, we must first understand what the Iranian government system is and how it operates. Iran, unlike the United States, is not democratic. "Iran is confusing because it has an unelected Supreme Leader at the top and a

president who is chosen in far from perfect elections" (Totten, 2019). Iran operates under an authoritarian dictatorship. This governmental structure limits the number of options Iranian citizens have if they want to take any action against the government as dictatorships have little regard for their citizens, their rights, and ethics; the typical options given to citizens by a dictatorship are ether obey the regime or be executed. This of course is a **false dichotomy** as the regime inaccurately limits the citizens choices to death or obedience so that the regime stays in control (Potasznik, Day 3). There are other options, but they all come at a price.

The stakeholders, in this case, are the Iranian government which has absolute control over their citizens, the Telecom firm and Institute for Physics and Mathematics which regulates the nation's internet under the government's authority (Totten, 2019), the Iranian citizens including the protestors who have little to no rights in the eyes of the government and the international nations which can intervene if human rights are violated. Each of these stakeholders is greatly affected by the actions of the Iranian government; thus, we will focus on the Iranian government actions and come up with possible options for the citizens from there.

To see the benefit and risks each stakeholder has, we must analyze the effects of an internet blackout and how society is affected by it. It is necessary to see the steps taken to achieve the internet blackout status as well. One reporter notes that Iran has spent years developing an internal "intranet" network so that certain branches of government and banks, for example, can stay online inside the country during shutdowns that cut Iran off from the outside world: "People can still access domestic websites that are connected to this network, which means that Iranian apps [and] websites can work although there's no [international] internet access" (Baraniuk, 2019).

Due to this internal network, the Iranian internet shutdown only affected communications going in and out of Iran. Now one may ask, why would they have an internal network already established and what would they gain from it? Well, the Iranian government saw the significance and power they hold should they control the internet. Analyzing this situation from a **utilitarian** perspective, we can justify the government's actions. To elaborate on this, we must understand utilitarianism, an ethical school of thought which justifies the means with the ends (Potasznik, Day 2). This mindset fits well with authoritarian governments, as their ends are control over the people, and they use any means necessary to accomplish it. In Iran's case, the government wanted to have control and order over the people, the means they used was to issue an internet blackout. Depending on who you ask, this mindset can be ethical or unethical. From the citizen's perspective, focusing on the protesters, you may see this as a form of oppression. The citizens decided to voice their opinions and concerns over the price increase of fuel and the government immediately punished them for speaking out. If you are from a nation that holds freedom of speech as an important right, you might see this as unethical oppression. Iran's government, on the other hand, could see this as an ethical move as the ignorance that comes with lack of access to information can restore peace and order to the entire population. Protests can be dangerous and violent, and perhaps shutting off internet access is simply an unfortunate step on the way to protecting citizens from danger and violence.

The benefit for Iran is that they stay in a relatively stable position of power when they shut down online communications; the negative for them (aside from getting bad publicity) is the possibility of an uprising. The nation's citizens are the most affected: since the internet connects people across the world, abruptly stopping this connection will have major consequences. These consequences range from losing international business and profits to losing contact with family

The first use of a given class term is in bold, defined, applied to your topic, and cited

Your own points and ideas are analyzed and synthesized, not simply summarized. Various elements of different ideas are weighed against others.

members inside and outside of Iran. There are no benefits for the citizens, unless we count the dubious reasoning that was used to justify the utilitarian mindset. There are no benefits for foreign nations either; if a whole nation suddenly goes offline, it raises concern as there is no word on their state. There is also a loss of profits for international corporations who usually do business with Iranians online, as well as an increase in political tensions.

Now that we know the effects of an internet blackout and who benefits from it, how was the Iranian government able to shut down the internet despite all the privately-owned internet providers? Baraniuk (2019) points out that the internet system in the country is not a single network that is easy to switch on or off. Rather, a bit like in the UK, it is formed from a series of privately-owned networks that link together. Disrupting such a system is not straightforward. However, connections to the outside world in Iran are funneled through just two entities: the state telecom firm and the Institute for Physics and Mathematics. Having the entirety of the internet depend on only two contact points means that authorities are easily able to block communications in and out of the country.

Once the Iranian government had control over the access points, they could regulate all information and connections going in and out of the country. The telecom firm and the Institute for Physics and Mathematics are critical stakeholders because both institutions hold the ability to turn the internet on and off. Even though this stakeholder is the government's means for their end, they hold no individual rights as they operate under the government's rule. The telecom firm can control when to shut the internet down whenever the government gives the order. Another risk for the citizens is secondary use of internet control mechanisms. Since the government can shut the internet on and off, which is the primary purpose of the firm's internet control, who's to say they couldn't also control what information citizens can view since they

oversee all the information coming in and out of the country. Spying on citizens would constitute secondary use of government-granted powers (Potasznik, Day 4). "If you architect your country's internet access so you control the gateways, i.e. create choke points, you can censor at will," says Prof Alan Woodward (Baraniuk, 2019).

This type of "government moderated" system is already implemented in other nations, China being a notable example. The Chinese government has absolute control over its citizens with what information they can view online, and even goes out of their way to punish those who criticize the government online. This is system is unethical as people should have the right to information and should have the right to criticize the government; however, since the Chinese governmental structure takes the form of a dictatorship, the citizens do not have those rights (unlike people in many western societies). It appears that the Iranian government is trying to increase its authoritarian reach, and has the potential to implement a system similar to China. The crucial thing to note is the missing information within this article as it does not state how long the internet shutdown lasted beyond November 20th; we do not know what effects of a long-term internet blackout had on the citizens. Reporting on these details may have shown if the internet blackout was a "successful" form of oppression or if it caused damage to the Iranian regime. Without knowing the full impact the internet blackout had, it is difficult to decide whether the nation suffered severe negative consequences and whether it's worth it for the Iranian government to try this again.

Now that we have discussed the problem at hand, along with the benefits and risks that come with each stakeholder, plus missing or vague information, we can come up with possible solutions for the situation from the citizen's perspective. I will emphasize three stakeholders as

they are the most affected in these theoretical options: the citizens, the government, and the telecom firm.

The citizens can decide to be passive and allow the government to continue oppressing them. Since this is the default option for the citizens – it is what occurs if the citizens do nothing – going with this option may be considered as **Inertia Bias** (Potasznik, Day 3). A change from this default would certainly benefit the citizens, so if they stay with it regardless of its drawbacks, they may simply be adhering to the status quo. Supposing that the citizens do nothing, this means that they would have no say in what the government does. The government will continue to have unchecked power over the people and this may lead to even worse consequences for citizens if they do not successfully thwart the government's plans. It would be in their best interest to do something instead of doing nothing. As previously mentioned, since the government controls the internet on and off switch, they can also control what information the citizens can view. Another possibility is that the internet blackout is just a taste of the power that the Iranian government has. I believe that this would be the worst possible option to take because although one may argue that the internet is not essential, it is still a very practical tool. In my opinion, it is certainly worth fighting for. Therefore, this option is ethically acceptable.

The second possible option for the citizens appears to be the most realistic possibility; however, it can be the most destructive. Starting a revolution can be a viable option if tensions with the government worsen over time. Many consequences come with this option though, the number of lives lost would be very costly for the nation's citizens should they decide to raise arms against the government. A dictatorship, as we have already stated, does not act for the benefit of the people, instead, they only act to benefit themselves. Aside from the catastrophic but very real possibility of a mass genocide, the Iranian government can deny the people their

basic needs, which would cause unethical suffering. A less drastic version of a revolution against the government would be a revolt against the intercom firm. Citizens could protest that the presence of this information funnel is unjustified and gives too much power to the government. Even if the protest does not work out, it could bring international attention to the problematic setup, which could benefit the Iranian citizens as their protest towards the rise in fuel prices would gain more attention. At that point, maybe international nations would see the oppression taking place and be galvanized into action. Similar protest/international attention cycles are already happening in other parts of the world. Going back to the Chinese government example, Hong Kong and China have seen similar situations; what started as a protest against extradition laws has snowballed into a full-fledged anti-government movement (Yeung, 2019). We have also seen, however, how these types of protests can lead to serious violence. If the Iranians were to escalate their protests to that level, they may be risking their own lives. From a deontological perspective, then, this option is prohibited, but from a utilitarian perspective, it is acceptable.

The final and most beneficial option for an Iranian citizen would be to wait out the internet blackout. Eventually, the government might settle down a little bit and become more reasonable. The citizens can take this opportunity to show the effects the internet shutdown have by showing the government the large amounts of profits the nation lost as a result of their actions. This option can only work if there are long term consequences because of the internet blackout. This will make the government think twice about their actions. I think that after seeing the large amount of money that is lost, the government might reflect on their actions because money equals power in a way. It is hoped this option would also negatively affect the telecom firms, although indirectly. They may still be paid for their services, but if the government loses

money, they may limit their contracts with providers like the telecom companies. In my opinion, this option is ethically obligatory since it is the only one that minimizes violence.

In conclusion, the Iranian government's choice of executing an internet shutdown is unethical as it severely disrupted the lives of its citizens and only benefitted government-sanctioned entities by making their authoritarian misdeeds harder to discover; the consequences as currently seen range from loss of business to mounting international concern and scorn. Along with the potential secondary use of the telecom firm regarding the control of information and censorship, if the situation was analyzed using US laws, then it could be stated that the Iranian government was trying to silence the fuel increase protest. This could be violating citizens' **freedom of speech** (Potasznik, slide 6); however, Iranian people do not have the same constitutional rights as Americans, so this does not apply. Furthermore, Iran's way of controlling the flow of information is unethical as it gives them inordinate amounts of power over their citizens. If you can shut down the most important tool in modern life, what's to stop you from controlling what information people get to view, or even think? The blackout only benefits Iran's government, at the expense of innocent everyday citizens. Waiting out the blackout while seeking international attention is the most viable option for Iranian citizens because it minimizes loss of life and it might make the government reconsider their actions.

Conclusion is used to emphasize previous points rather than introduce new ideas. Paper ends with a clearly defended argument and avoids "There really isn't a good solution here" or "I guess we'll never know" clichés.

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