

Yahoo!, Iran, and Calamity Journalism

October 19, 2009

Did Yahoo! turn over user data from 200,000 Yahoo! Iran email accounts to Iranian authorities in exchange for the unblocking of Yahoo.com? Not likely. Last week, Richard Koman over at ZDNet reported [this exact allegation](#) [1]; ZDNet quickly [retracted the post](#) [2] in full within the day, given the unreliability of the source and the alarming disregard of basic journalistic best practices. A quick inquiry with Yahoo! (or even a simple search of Yahoo!'s website) would have revealed critical factual errors in the underlying report, which should have raised red flags as to its reliability. (To start, Yahoo! has no Iranian website or base of [operations in Malaysia](#) [3].) And these steps should have been taken before such a serious accusation was lobbed into the public sphere, to be reposted and prejudged. Commentary on the state of [online journalism aside](#) [4], such wildly false accusations distract from the many real challenges to Internet freedom emerging all over the world: censorship and intimidation are on the rise and Internet freedom advocates are fighting off filtering mandates left and right. Questions of ethical corporate behavior in the ICT space can be thorny and complex. Exhortations directed at tech companies to "do the right thing" are only as effective as our collective understanding of the human rights challenges they actually face. At risk of stating the obvious, we must take care to understand the exact nature of government demands and how companies are responding in order to develop appropriate and effective strategies to address both. [The Global Network Initiative \(GNI\)](#) [5] has been a vital platform for understanding the human rights and corporate responsibility landscape in the ICT sector. Because Yahoo! is a member of the GNI, CDT and other human rights advocates were able to quickly sort fact from fiction when the ZDNet blog post hit. And GNI's [accountability mechanisms](#) [6], which gear up in the coming year, are a good first step towards systematically increasing transparency around government restrictions and company responses. Through its involvement with GNI, Yahoo! has taken concrete steps to increase transparency to interested stakeholders - perhaps one reason why the allegations in the ZDNet blog post were retracted so quickly. Companies that haven't taken such steps may not be so "fortunate" in the public eye. Bloggers and journalists play a critical role in advancing human rights by documenting violations and holding companies' feet to the fire. Inflammatory, knee jerk, and false allegations however, do nothing to compel better company behavior or advance the cause of Internet freedom, in Iran or elsewhere.

- [Journalism](#)
- [Yahoo](#)
- [iran](#)
- [International](#)
- [censorship](#)
- [GNI](#)
- [CDT](#)

Copyright © 2009 by Center for Democracy & Technology. CDT can be freely copied and used as long as you make no substantive changes and clearly give us credit. [Details](#).

Source URL: <https://www.cdt.org/blogs/cynthia-wong/yahoo-iran-and-calamity-journalism>

Links:

[1] <http://government.zdnet.com/?p=5547>

[2] <http://blogs.zdnet.com/BTL/?p=25745>

[3] <http://www.yhumanrightsblog.com/blog/2009/10/09/iran/>

[4] <http://www.techcrunch.com/2009/10/10/witn-yahoo-didnt-sentence-200000-iranians-to-death-and-other-misadventures-in-online-journalism>

[5] <http://www.globalnetworkinitiative.org/>

[6] <http://www.globalnetworkinitiative.org/governanceframework/index.php>



Yahoo!, Iran, and Calamity Journalism

Published on Center for Democracy & Technology (<https://www.cdt.org>)
