

Ban on WhatsApp, Google Play Lifted



TEHRAN -- Iranian authorities have lifted a ban on Meta's instant messaging platform WhatsApp and Google Play, IRNA reported on Tuesday.

"A positive majority vote has been reached to lift limitations on access to some popular foreign platforms such as WhatsApp and Google Play," it said, referring to a meeting of Iran's Supreme Council of Cyberspace headed by President Masoud Pezeshkian.

The meeting was attended by the heads of the three branches of government, ministers, and other council members.

Following a presentation of perspectives previously as-

essed by relevant authorities, the council approved adjustments to existing restrictions, IRNA said.

"Today, we took the first step towards lifting internet restrictions with unity and collaboration," Minister of Information and Communications Technology Sattar Hashemi wrote on X.

Social media platforms were widely used in foreign-backed riots in Iran.

At the session on Tuesday, the importance of regulated governance in cyberspace and the need to support domestic platforms was underscored, IRNA said.

Qom Seminary Adds Cyberspace Studies to Curriculum

TEHRAN -- The Islamic Seminary in Iran has officially launched a new academic discipline focused on "Religion and Cyberspace Studies," aiming to integrate modern technological advancements with traditional religious scholarship, IQNA reported.

During a press conference, Habib Dastani Benisi, head of the Center for Religion and Cyberspace Studies at the seminary, announced that the program was formally approved about six weeks ago.

"Around a year and a half ago, the seminary decided to introduce new academic fields related to cyberspace alongside traditional disciplines such as jurisprudence, principles of Islamic law, theology, and exegesis," he said.

The newly introduced program, equivalent to a master's degree, offers eight specialized tracks at the third level of seminary education and four at the doctoral equivalent level.



"We felt the need for a specialized center within the seminary to strongly pursue this field, and thus, the Center for Religion and Cyberspace Studies was established under the direction of the seminary's leadership," Dastani said.

Enrollment for the inaugural semester began on December 22 and will remain open until January 4. Classes are currently planned to be held in Qom, with future expansion to other provinces and inclusion of female students under consideration.

For the upcoming academic term

starting in February, the program will initially focus on two key tracks: computer games and artificial intelligence.

Dastani emphasized the seminary's approach to cyberspace and AI as "productive and skill-oriented, although theoretical depth remains a priority given the seminary's academic tradition."

He further revealed plans to introduce a "Governance of Cyberspace" track at the doctoral level, with the aim of keeping the program at the forefront of global academic developments in the field.

Highlighting the caliber of instructors, Dastani noted that some of the country's leading experts in artificial intelligence are affiliated with the seminary. He added, "Nearly 3,000 syllabus units have been developed, and some of our instructors specialize in the philosophy of artificial intelligence."

Iran's 100-Second Film Festival Focuses on Resistance

TEHRAN -- The 14th edition of the International 100-Second Film Festival has introduced a new section called "Beyond 100", expanding the traditional 100-second film limit to include works up to 300 seconds.

It underscores the festival's commitment to addressing pressing humanitarian issues, with a strong focus on supporting the Palestinian resistance.

During a press conference, festival director Yousef Mansouri emphasized the significance of art as a medium to highlight the plight of the Palestinian people.

"Beyond 100" section covers top-

ics such as resistance to occupation, the rights of women and children, art as a response to racism, and global solidarity with Gaza amidst the ongoing atrocities.

"This section invites filmmakers from around the world to present works that reflect these vital issues, fostering cultural and artistic dialogue to support the Palestinian struggle," Mansouri said.

Hamid-Reza Jafarian, head of the Soureh Cinema Organization, highlighted the festival's 20-year legacy as a platform for addressing major global issues. He noted the festival's ability to discover and nurture young

talents, many of whom have gone on to achieve prominence in Iranian and international cinema.

This year's edition places the Palestinian cause at the heart of its mission, aiming to spotlight the resilience and suffering of the Palestinian people through impactful short films.

Winning entries will be shown on various platforms, including cinema, television, and social media, ensuring a broader reach and greater influence.

The festival offers substantial rewards to participants, with cash prizes of up to 2,000 euros at "Beyond 100" section, alongside statues and

additional prizes for both national and international categories, encouraging filmmakers to deliver their finest works.

The 100-Second Film Festival is an event where filmmakers from around the world show their creativity by making short films, each lasting up to 100 seconds. These films focus on "Ethnic Cinema", exploring different cultures, formats, and perspectives to inspire and enrich the audience.

The deadline for submitting works is April 8, 2025. The 14th edition of the 100-Second Film Festival will be held in May 2025.

Will AI Make Fake Internet Reviews Worse?

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The emergence of generative artificial intelligence tools that allow people to efficiently produce novel and detailed online reviews with almost no work has put merchants, service providers and consumers in uncharted territory, watchdog groups and researchers say.

Phony reviews have long plagued many popular consumer websites, such as Amazon and Yelp. They are typically traded on private social media groups between fake review brokers and businesses willing to pay. Sometimes, such reviews are initiated by businesses that offer customers incentives such as gift cards for positive feedback.

But AI-infused text generation tools, popularized by OpenAI's ChatGPT, enable fraudsters to produce reviews faster and in

greater volume, according to tech industry experts.

The deceptive practice, which is illegal in the U.S., is carried out year-round but becomes a bigger problem for consumers during the holiday shopping season, when many people rely on reviews to help them purchase gifts.

Fake reviews are found across a wide range of industries, from e-commerce, lodging and restaurants, to services such as home repairs, medical care and piano lessons.

The Transparency Company, a tech company and watchdog group that uses software to detect fake reviews, said it started to see AI-generated reviews show up in large numbers in mid-2023 and they have multiplied ever since.

For a report released this month, The Transparency Company ana-

lyzed 73 million reviews in three sectors: home, legal and medical services. Nearly 14% of the reviews were likely fake, and the company expressed a "high degree of confidence" that 2.3 million reviews were partly or entirely AI-generated.

"It's just a really, really good tool for these review scammers," said Maury Blackman, an investor and advisor to tech startups, who reviewed The Transparency Company's work and is set to lead the organization starting Jan. 1.

In August, software company DoubleVerify said it was observing a "significant increase" in mobile phone and smart TV apps with reviews crafted by generative AI. The reviews often were used to deceive customers into installing apps that could hijack devices or run ads constantly, the

company said.

The following month, the Federal Trade Commission sued the company behind an AI writing tool and content generator called Rytr, accusing it of offering a service that could pollute the marketplace with fraudulent reviews.

The FTC, which this year banned the sale or purchase of fake reviews, said some of Rytr's subscribers used the tool to produce hundreds and perhaps thousands of reviews for garage door repair companies, sellers of "replica" designer handbags and other businesses.

Max Spero, CEO of AI detec-

tion company Pangram Labs, said the software his company uses has detected with almost certainty that some AI-generated appraisals posted on Amazon bubbled up to the top of review search results because they were so detailed and appeared to be well thought-out.

But determining what is fake or not can be challenging. External parties can fall short because they don't have "access to data signals that indicate patterns of abuse," Amazon has said.

Pangram Labs has done detection for some prominent online sites, which Spero declined to name due to non-disclosure

agreements. He said he evaluated Amazon and Yelp independently.

Many of the AI-generated comments on Yelp appeared to be posted by individuals who were trying to publish enough reviews to earn an "Elite" badge, which is intended to let users know they should trust the content, Spero said.

The badge provides access to exclusive events with local business owners. Fraudsters also want it so their Yelp profiles can look more realistic, said Kay Dean, a former federal criminal investigator who runs a watchdog group called Fake Review Watch.

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Avini Institute Begins Production of 'Gando 3'



TEHRAN -- The Shahid Avini Cultural and Artistic Institute has officially started the pre-production of the third season of the popular Iranian series 'Gando'.

lished by ISNA, the screenplay for 'Gando 3' has been completed, and the series has now entered the pre-production phase.

Casting and other preparations are underway, and filming is ex-

pected to begin soon.

Like its predecessors, the third installment will focus on a high-stakes security case.

The earlier seasons of 'Gando', produced in 2019 and 2021, captivated audiences with their intense storylines and high-quality production.

While the cast for 'Gando 3' has not been announced yet, it remains unclear if the new season will feature the original team or take a new direction.

Mehdi Naqavian, head of the Simafilm Center, previously mentioned that the production timeline for 'Gando 3' has been set. Filming is slated for 2024, with the series expected to air during Iranian New Year holidays in 2025.

Picture of the Day



The Christmas mood has set in especially in Christian-populated neighborhoods of Tehran ahead of the new year.

Photo by Tasnim