

Subscription Video on Demand and Video Content Regulation in Iran

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Received 3 March 2025 | Accepted 16 July 2025 |

Published online 13 August 2025

Abstract

This article examines catalogue curation and content policies for subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) platforms in Iran, focusing on Filimo, Namava, and Filmnet. It argues that the regulatory environment in Iran is one of the possible reasons why international SVODs have yet to establish their presence in Iran. This paper contends that the Islamic Republic exerts various types of control strategies to regulate what is classified as the public and private screen spheres. It explores the reasons behind this categorisation and examines why content policies for both national and foreign content on SVOD platforms, viewed as private spheres, are less restrictive compared to those imposed on public screens. It discusses how these regulations determine the availability and discoverability of Iranian and non-Iranian video content on these platforms and their censorship obligations. A selection of censored scenes in *The Queen's Gambit* on Filimo is analysed to investigate the censorship process for non-Iranian content.

Keywords

subscription video-on-demand (svod) – content regulation – censorship – Netflix – Filimo – Namava – Filmnet – Iran

With the growth of online streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime, most films and TV series are now accessible on small screens at the same time across the world and, regarding the films, very close to the time they are released in cinemas. In Iran, the combined

forces of globalisation and continuous technological advancement have made the Islamic Republic's attempts at total control over video content consumption impracticable.

When video technology and foreign video content were banned in the 1980s, video went underground, and people gathered their own home video libraries from their favourite movies or TV programmes. These libraries were later updated with videos on CDs or DVDs from underground video dealers (Atwood 2021, 30-33, 77-80). Today, this underground traffic has morphed to the digital realm, but the advent of streaming technology has not only forced the Iranian state to rethink its regulatory practices, Iranian users have also gained – legal – access to more foreign content.

With the surge in social media, mobile applications and Persian-language satellite TV programmes, an increasing number of Iranians have come to find the state broadcaster IRIB's (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting) programmes regressive and outdated (Hamshahri 2022; Khabaronline 2022a; Tabnak 2022). And due to IRIB's tightened strategies, many television projects that had previously passed the preproduction regulations have not been allowed to be broadcast on IRIB after production. One of the first programmes to be banned was Mehran Modiri's *Bitter Coffee* (2010) because of its political hints and allegorical references (Falaki 2022, 82). This series eventually became one of the first to be distributed on DVD within the so-called Home Show Network, a state-supervised distribution service for films which in 2010 was expanded to include TV series.

The popularity of satellite TV channels with their, in the eyes of the state, undesirable programmes, has been a source of state concern over the years (Alikhah 2008, 96-97). Further, social media and online video-sharing portals have significantly increased the state's worries about these communication channels (Akhavan 2015, 214-215; Ali and Fahmy 2013, 58,60; Golkar 2011, 56, 57).

Generally, on a global scale, the emergence and development of internet-based streaming services have altered the definition of television as a medium and the practice of television viewing in such a way that ‘watching television has gradually become reconceptualised as being something active’ (Tryon 2015, 105). Viewers can actively select their programme by subscribing to a video streaming service instead of passively surfing television channels. In Iran, this active viewing includes the choice of video content from social media through VPNs (Wulf et al. 2022, 394), from satellite televisions, as well as from national and international SVODs.

It is notable, however, that subscribing to international SVOD platforms still isn’t widespread in Iran. While an increasing number of Iranian youths do subscribe to external online streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime via VPN, these services have had limited success in Iran until now. The first reason is that the state doesn’t allow foreign businesses to establish a presence in Iran and applies a filtering policy that limits Iranians’ access to these websites/platforms (Salamati 2022, 3, 5). Next is the lack of Persian dubbed or subtitled content on these services – a consequence of the fact that the international companies have yet to receive a licence to provide their services to Iran. The linguistic differences in and of themselves immensely reduce Iranian audience engagement (Ameri and Khoshsaligheh 2018, 181-182; Zeydabadi-Nejad 2016, 108), and as a result of the sanctions, the success of international SVOD platforms in Iran is furthered hampered by the difficulties with international subscription payments for Iranians (Yalcintas and Alizadeh 2020, 528). In addition, as a consequence of the VPN requirement for connection and the slow speed of the internet, most current Iranian subscribers use services from neighbouring or other countries. Also, one should keep in mind the availability of websites, Telegram accounts and underground markets that provide users with recent titles for free or at a small price. These

websites can be accessed through VPNs, and when they are continuously blocked, they keep being recreated through mirror websites.

In 2015, a limited online streaming service named Movie Land was established by Shatel, a private Iranian company which later changed the name of the service to Namava. Following Shatel, Sabaidea, an IT company that had previous experience with a free video streaming service known as Aparat, started the Filimo online streaming platform (Hajmohammadi 2018, 270). Although initially less competitive and with a smaller market presence, that same year Filmnet joined these companies on the domestic market. While other Iranian companies have launched SVOD platforms since then, Namava, Filimo and Filmnet remain the dominant players in the field. Defining their services as SVODs, they have improved their video catalogues, just as they have entered film and series production and generally expanded their services to attract Iranian viewers.

The domestic platforms operate within the Home Show Network, which today refers to a set of mechanisms that contribute to the production and – digital or non-digital – distribution of video content for home viewing. The network includes several companies and industry professionals working under the state's codes and regulations but outside the IRIB organisation. While most non-national, especially Western, video products were previously prohibited (Atwood 2021, 30, 181), a vast collection of Western film and video content is now available on the Iranian SVOD services while still absent from public theatres and IRIB. A more detailed explanation of this will be provided later in this paper.

In contrast to the substantial body of research on Iranian cinema, scholarly examinations of the Iranian home viewing experience have been limited. This article aligns with recent studies (Atwood 2018; Naficy 2021; Salamati 2022) that contribute to covering this research gap. The paper endeavours to address the following questions: What are Iran's state control and censorship policies regarding video content on online streaming platforms?

How do Iran's state regulatory and censorship policies affect the availability and discoverability of video content on domestic platforms?

In this study, I draw upon existing literature on subscription video-on-demand services and their regulatory policies worldwide. Additionally, I use research on control and censorship policies concerning video and film content in post-revolutionary Iran, and I refer to the state's websites and news coverage. I examine the catalogues of Filimo, Namava and Filmnet to investigate content availability on these platforms and the ways in which this content can be discovered by Iranian users. Furthermore, to illustrate the censorship process vis-à-vis non-Iranian content, I analyse a selection of scenes from the miniseries *The Queen's Gambit* (Netflix 2020) as shown on Filimo, comparing them with the same scenes on Netflix. But before discussing the content and catalogues of Iranian SVODs, I review the SVOD regulation policies in various countries to demonstrate how Iran's SVOD regulations differ significantly from those in force elsewhere.

National SVOD Regulations in a Global Perspective

In many countries, the ever-increasing spread of mostly US-based SVOD services has led to a desire to regulate their activities at the national level. This creates a challenging and complex process for regulating both national and foreign 'media institutions' that operate and interact across various media types (Lobato et al. 2023, 2). National policy regulations vary among governments of 'diverse political persuasions' and include 'SVOD censorship, content classification, operational licensing, taxation, local content quotas, production obligations, and contributions to national production funds' (Ibid., 1).

In the case of Europe, scholars mention the 2018 updated version of the Audio Visual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) as a step towards supporting European video content production. According to this European policy, SVOD service providers must dedicate at

least 30 per cent of their catalogues to European works, and ensure their prominence and discoverability for European users. The international service providers are also required to contribute to local content production (D'Arma and Gangemi 2021, 455; Farchy, Bideau, and Tallec 2022, 419-423). In Australia, SVOD providers have been expected to invest at least five per cent of their Australian revenue in the production of new, local screen content. Furthermore, it is required for such companies to report on their 'local content expenditure' for tax purposes, and since 2022, an annual report must be submitted by SVOD providers regarding the discoverability of domestic content on their platforms (Lobato et al. 2023, 4). Also in 2018 – the same year Netflix released its first Mexican production – Mexico introduced tax payment obligations for SVOD providers (Gomez and Munoz Larroa 2023, 94-95).

Other countries like Russia, Indonesia, India and China limit and censor US-based SVOD platforms (Curtin and Li 2018, 342; Lobato et al. 2023, 2; Sherstoboeva 2019, 383). Notably, China has entered the competitive SVOD market by introducing their own major platforms, such as iQIYI, owned by Baidu, the largest Chinese search engine. Active in many areas, including SVOD content production and distribution, the company aims to ensure satisfaction for both party officials and the platform's broad, popular audience (Curtin and Li 2018, 345, 351).

In several countries in the Middle East, major companies like Netflix, Disney+ and Amazon Prime share the market with local online streaming services. At the same time, all providers comply with the regulations and policies of the respective states (Kamal, Badr, and Mahrous 2024, 24; Khalil and Zayani 2022, 174). Located in Dubai Media City in the United Arab Emirates, Shahid Broadcasting, part of the powerful, Saudi-controlled MBC Group (orig. Middle East Broadcasting Center), rebranded as a digital streaming service in 2020. Shahid applies Western approaches to media administration and aesthetics, blending them

with Arab culture and values. The company offers a vast video catalogue for Arabic-language audiences in multiple Arab countries in the region and the Arab diaspora worldwide (Khalil 2023, 417-418; Khalil and Zayani 2022, 176). Shahid, which complies with the Emirates' media policy and Arab norms and traditions, owes its success to matching local, regional, and global interactions (Khalil and Zayani 2022, 180).

The WATCH IT online streaming service in Egypt was introduced in 2019 to provide Egyptian video content, aiming to attract Arabic-language audiences within and beyond the country's borders. However, in the current Egyptian digital streaming market, WATCH IT must compete against strong rivals such as Netflix, Disney+ and Shahid (Kamal, Badr, and Mahrous 2024, 33-34). In Turkey, BluTV initiated its video streaming services with original Turkish productions in 2016, the same year Netflix entered the country. Both platforms enjoyed uncensored streaming until 2019, when the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTSC) introduced regulatory rules to maintain 'public morality'. Both BluTV and Netflix comply with these monitoring and censorship policies to remain in the Turkish market (Ildir and Celik Rappas 2022, 256-257). Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, Netflix maintains a 'symbiotic relationship' with the state by aligning its video content with the state's regulatory policies. In Saudi Arabia, these policies revolve around the state's national and political concerns, but the Saudi Kingdom has shown tolerance regarding video content exhibiting Western norms or culture (Khalil and Zayani 2021, 212).

In Iran, the ways in which SVOD platforms have been introduced and implemented have consistently served the goal of maintaining long-term policies aimed at regulating and censoring video content as well as controlling the access of local viewers to foreign video content. Iran has blocked foreign-based businesses and portals entirely. It prefers to import the technology, consequently giving the state total control over local platforms and their content regulations, leaving no room for competition in the market. The Islamic Republic has

always hesitated to accept newly introduced technology, especially when it could potentially lead to a rise in cultural, economic or political concerns (Atwood 2018, 139-140). But over the last four decades, Islamic Republic media policy has been more or less the same: Initially guided by potential concerns regarding the new media, the next step has been to set up restrictive policies and establish or adjust a legal framework to prevent or limit public access to the new media. In this way, the state has bought time to become more familiar with the various aspects, applications and limits of the new media. Eventually, the new media have been localised through applications and platforms that replicate the foreign counterparts and exercise complete control over metadata as well as the ‘outflow’ and ‘inflow’ of data transfer (Yalcintas and Alizadeh 2020, 522).

Regulatory Policies for Video Products in Iran

Considering countries like China, Cuba and Saudi Arabia, Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas stress the ‘proactive role’ of governments in the development of a sort of internet in favour of these countries’ respective social, political and economic goals. The authors explain how abusing internet features and posting counter-information allow the governments to ‘influence both domestic and international opinion’ (Kalathil and Boas 2002, 36, 38).

Kalathil and Boas argue that while these governments may face political challenges due to some kinds of internet usage, many of them ‘are proactively promoting the development of an internet that serves state-defined interests’ (Kalathil and Boas 2002, 3). Likewise, the Islamic Republic proactively creates new media resources, platforms and content within a state-approved framework. This proactivity in the realm of new media ‘seeks not to limit but to promote technologies in ways that are favourable to the state’ (Rahimi 2015, 371). As a result, the state-approved new media apply measures to marginalise the other censored media and to propagate and advertise the state’s specific political, cultural or economic goals

(Rahimi 2015, 371, 373). The Islamic Republic's restrictive policies entail censoring and banning foreign video content (Shahabi 2007, 116-20), prohibiting satellite television viewing (Alikhah 2008, 96-97), and filtering social media and the internet (Langford 2015, 254-255; Yalcintas and Alizadeh 2020, 524-525).

In Iran, the control and regulatory policies regarding video content currently revolve around these restrictive and proactive strategies. In this context, it is essential to note the Islamic Republic's distinction between the public and the private sphere. Since the 1979 revolution, the public sphere in Iran has been 'at the mercy of state regulation, which controls everything from social interactions to the outward appearance of religion' (Atwood 2018, 141). In this regard, Iranian film and television productions are required to comply with specific laws and regulations and undergo multiple religious and cultural examinations as well as certifying processes (Naficy 2000, 563-567). For instance, women's representation in films and TV series must follow the rules and policies of the state regarding women's appearance in public spaces (Atwood 2018, 141). However, the measures around both media production and distribution are less stringent when applied to what is considered 'the private sphere', which includes home entertainment. The Home Show Network, in its initial CD and DVD form and subsequent extension to SVOD platforms, is thus considered to be offering a private screen viewing, 'intended to be watched within the private sphere of the home' (Atwood 2021, 166). The rules and ban on satellite TV, as well as the regulations against the purchase and collection of first videocassettes, later CDs and DVDs containing prohibited content demonstrate how the state in other respects does intrude on Iranians' private screen viewings (Atwood 2021, 33, 44), yet the differences in state policies regarding public and private audiovisual media are noteworthy.

When it comes to the public sphere – IRIB and cinema theatres, for example – the Iranian state's restrictive policies are tighter, and most foreign content is excluded, as well as

parts of Iranian productions deemed unsuitable for the public sphere. While all public sphere media and content must adhere to these regulations, IRIB, in its capacity of the official cultural and political representative of the Islamic Republic, is subject to the strictest regulations of all.

The reason for categorising, on the other hand, SVOD platforms as private screens and applying distinct censorship rules to their content stems from the nature of these platforms and the way they tend to fragment their audiences, thus diminishing their overall societal impact at any given time. On a worldwide scale, Amanda Lotz observes two factors that distinguish online streaming television from ‘old-fashioned’ broadcast television: a broader ‘scope of content’ and ‘time flexibility’, both of which undermine ‘mass popularity’ of every single title. Lotz asserts that these characteristics of online streaming services eventually ‘result in much more choice for viewers and lead to substantial audience fragmentation’ (Lotz 2021, 892). This is why the Iranian state’s regulatory and control policies are comparatively less restrictive when it comes to these platforms.

Less restrictions, however, is not synonymous with no restrictions. For one thing, the domestic platforms operate within the state-controlled Home Show Network. As mentioned earlier, the Home Show Network is not part of IRIB – but Satra, the organisation responsible for the monitoring and regulation of online audio and video content, is (Satra 2024). Satra is an IRIB department that works jointly with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) and decides whether the required licenses should be granted, and to whom (Salamati 2022, 18-19). There are several kinds of licenses. Domestic productions must obtain a special production license for SVOD and, upon completion, a certificate of distribution. That means the certificate of production depends on whether the distribution platform is public or private. All completed productions, whether national or foreign, must acquire a certificate of distribution. There is a specific application process for distribution on SVOD platforms: an

application must be lodged on the Satra website, and the evaluation process then has ten steps that range from assessing the production's adherence to the Islamic Republic's standard for videos and, in the case of foreign products, verifying the authenticity of the application's ownership documents, to receiving the opinion of a review board (MCIG 2024; Satra 2024). This means that it is the responsibility of the online streaming services to censor all assumedly undesirable parts of a given video production before they apply for a distribution certificate.

Despite the distinction between public and private screen spaces, the lines between different types of regulation are blurred, and for each video, a combination of these now well-established processes may apply. As government-affiliated bodies consider the Home Show Network a suitable alternative to satellite TV, the support and expansion of content, especially domestically produced content, on Iranian streaming platforms are believed to have contributed to satellite television's decline in popularity among Iranian viewers (Bornanews 2023; Fararu 2023; Honaronline 2023; Khabaronline 2022b; Tasnim 2020). Also, Satra's website regularly posts positive news about online platforms, saying that IRIB considers online platforms as its supplement (Satra Vice-president 2022) or that IRIB supports the online version of Home Show Network (Satra Head of Communication 2022). Against this background, it is clear that Iran's SVOD platforms are part of the government's policy to provide supervised domestic or foreign video content (Fig. 1).

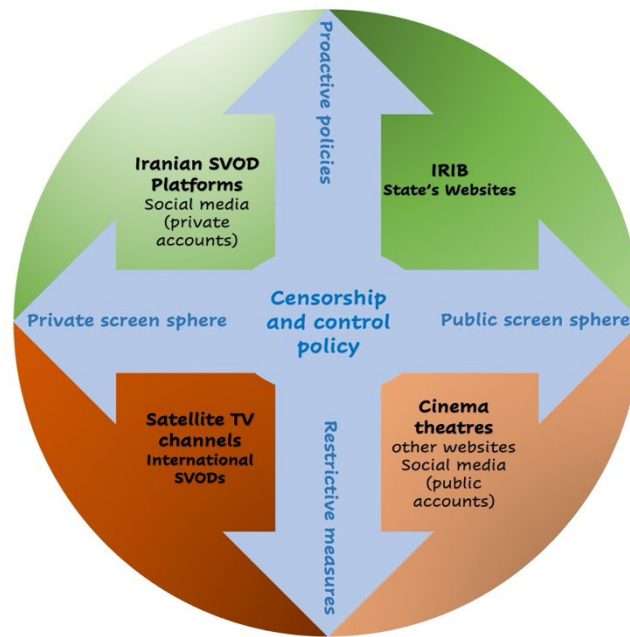


FIGURE 1 The Iranian state's proactive and restrictive control policy vis-à-vis

public and private spaces. The top right part represents the public sphere and includes proactive policies in Iranian media, IRIB, and their websites. The top left shows proactive policies in the private sphere, including SVOD platforms. The bottom right depicts public spaces that are regulated through restrictive policies – which means that they are not banned as long as they comply with those restrictions. The bottom left also covers restrictive measures on private screens, such as total bans or filtering on satellite TV and international SVOD services.

Iran's SVOD Catalogues and Video Content Policy

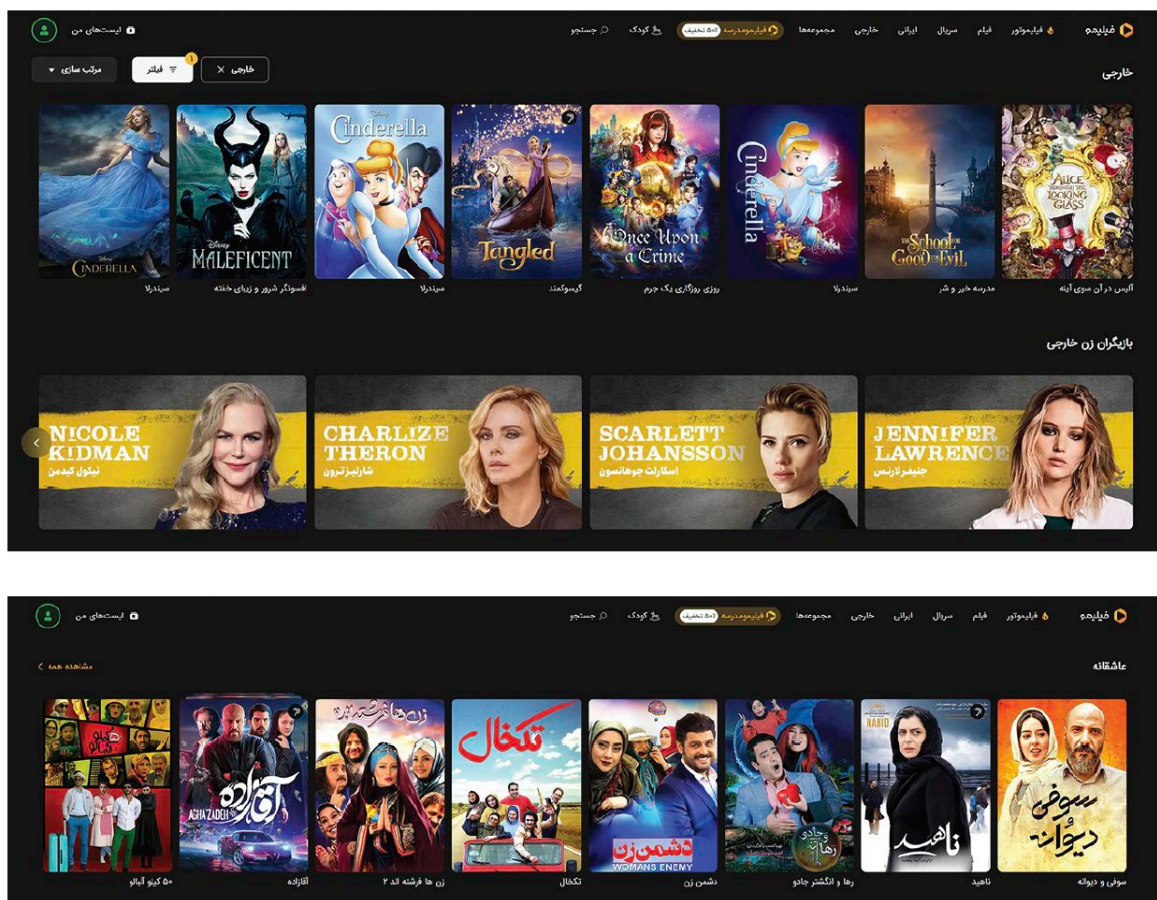
Key to a discussion of Iran's online streaming services are the catalogues they provide to their audiences. Generally, SVOD catalogues can be examined from two aspects: availability and discoverability (Lobato and Scarlata 2017, 1). The availability of content in Iran's SVOD catalogues can be considered in terms of domestic vs foreign productions (films and series). Considering the Islamic Republic's eagerness to regulate and control the media ever since

1979, it is thus noteworthy that the Iranian online streaming services offer non-Iranian video content that is made legally available to their subscribers. If we exclude the limited number of censored films and series broadcast on IRIB, before the existence of these platforms, non-national – crucially, Western – video content could only be found in underground markets or downloaded from unauthorised websites (Salamati 2022, 14; Zeydabadi-Nejad 2016, 102, 110). These foreign audiovisual products are still restricted from having showtime in cinema theatres or anywhere they can be watched in groups, namely public sphere. However, on the Iranian streaming platforms, entire collections of carefully selected foreign content are now legally accessible.

That international films and series are legally accessible on Iranian SVODs does not mean, however, that their presence there conforms to international copyright law (Ayoubi 2018, 2; Salamati 2022, 11; Zeydabadi-Nejad 2016, 110). Unlike Lobato's definition of SVOD catalogues as 'the corpus of licensed or owned content distributed by a particular platform at a given time' (Lobato 2018, 242), Iran's SVOD platforms offer foreign films and series for which the rights have not been clearly secured. This unclarity places Iran's SVOD platforms in an internationally illegitimate position, even though, unlike their global counterparts, Iran's SVODs are designed for Persian-language viewers only, and subscription is limited to users with an Iranian mobile number (for any payment or user interaction with the platforms, users need to enter a security code sent to their mobile phone). Without a subscription, or if connected from a non-Iranian IP (through VPN, for example), only domestic titles can be found, but there is no possibility of watching them. This shows how SVOD platforms can be limited and managed through internet access.

Within the context of Iran's SVOD platforms, a carefully curated selection of foreign films and series can secure a distribution certificate. These titles can be incorporated into the catalogues of multiple SVOD platforms within only a few weeks after their international

release. There are limits to this practice, though, as evidenced by the very different fates of two films from the 2023 batch of American box-office hits. Whereas Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*, which showcases the US military's use of the atomic bomb, found a place on Iran's SVODs with subtitles, Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* faced a complete absence and had absolutely no chance of obtaining a certificate of distribution, owing to its, from the Islamic Republic's viewpoint, unacceptable representation of women. While showing unveiled women in (foreign or Iranian) films or videos is strongly banned in public places, such images are moderately allowed on SVOD platforms for foreign products or actresses, but not to the extent of what is seen in *Barbie*. By contrast, Iranian actresses always carry the veil as their career prospects are tied to their compliance with this law, both within and outside Iran's borders. (Figs. 2 and 3).



FIGURES 2 AND 3: A presentation of foreign and Iranian actresses on Filimo. Screenshots.

The discoverability of content on SVOD platforms worldwide has been linked to three principal factors: browsing, search, and recommendations (Lobato and Scarlata 2017, 13). As such, discoverability refers to how users can engage with the range of video content on a given platform. In most countries, investigating the discoverability of local content in SVOD catalogues for domestic users can provide crucial information regarding their national video consumption. Considering the longstanding limitations on foreign video content imposed by the Islamic Republic and the absence of a competitive market, conversely, in the case of Iran, the discoverability of foreign content in domestic SVOD platforms is considerable: it can easily be found by searching for Persian or English keywords. However, in relation to browsing and recommendations, which are grounded in the platform's design and the utilisation of algorithms,

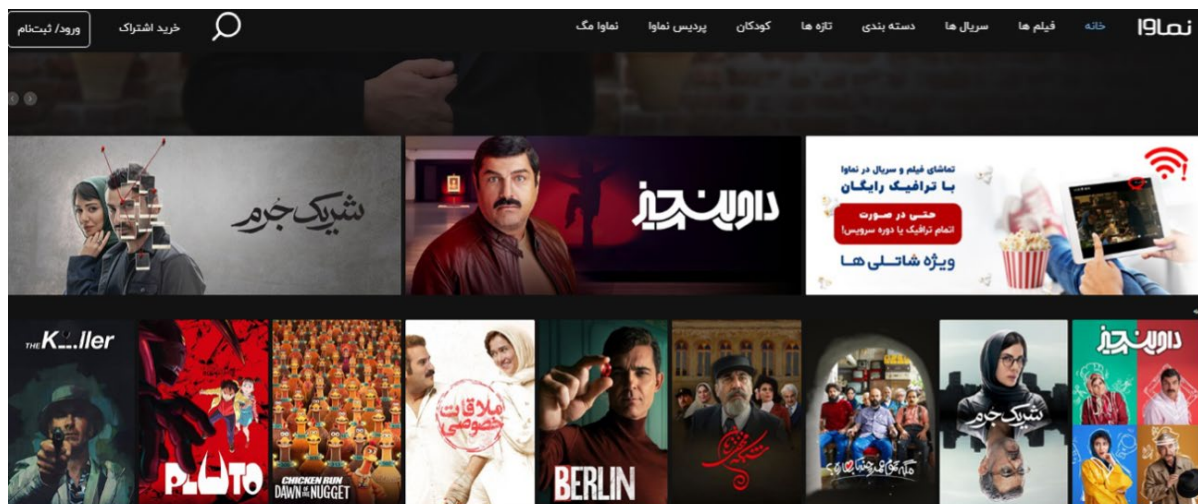


FIGURE 4 Namava's homepage with various advertised picture sizes. Screenshot.

these platforms generally prioritise Iranian content in accordance with the proactive policies of the state. This prioritisation is applied through the presentation of video titles on the first page, the ratio of advertised Iranian video titles to foreign video titles, and the size of advertised titles, all of which are designed to highlight domestic video content. When a

typical user navigates the platform, they are thus more likely to come across promoted Iranian titles, unless they specifically search for a foreign title using the search bar or foreign tabs.

Availability of non-Iranian content

While most foreign products, especially newly released films, have little chance of being shown in the public sphere, as discussed earlier, Iran's SVODs have an archive of many of the latest or other famous Western and Asian films and TV series. Below are a few examples:

The Queen's Gambit (Netflix 2020). A dubbed version of this miniseries is available on Filimo, Namava and Filmnet.

The Sandman (Netflix 2022). A subtitled version is available on Filimo, Namava and Filmnet.

The Man Who Fell to Earth (Showtime 2022). A subtitled version is available on Filimo and Namava.

Poker Face (Peacock 2023). A dubbed version is available on Filimo, a subtitled version on Namava and Filmnet.

Paper Girls (Amazon Prime 2022) is available on Namava and Filimo with subtitles.

Blood Free (Disney+ 2024) from South Korea is available on Filimo and Filmnet with subtitles.

No Mercy (Ay Yapim Fox TV 2024) from Turkey is available in a dubbed version on Filimo and Filmnet.

Cute Programmer (Prime Video 2021) from China is available on Namava with subtitles.

The Hope (Youku TV 2023-2024), also from China, is available on Filimo with subtitles.

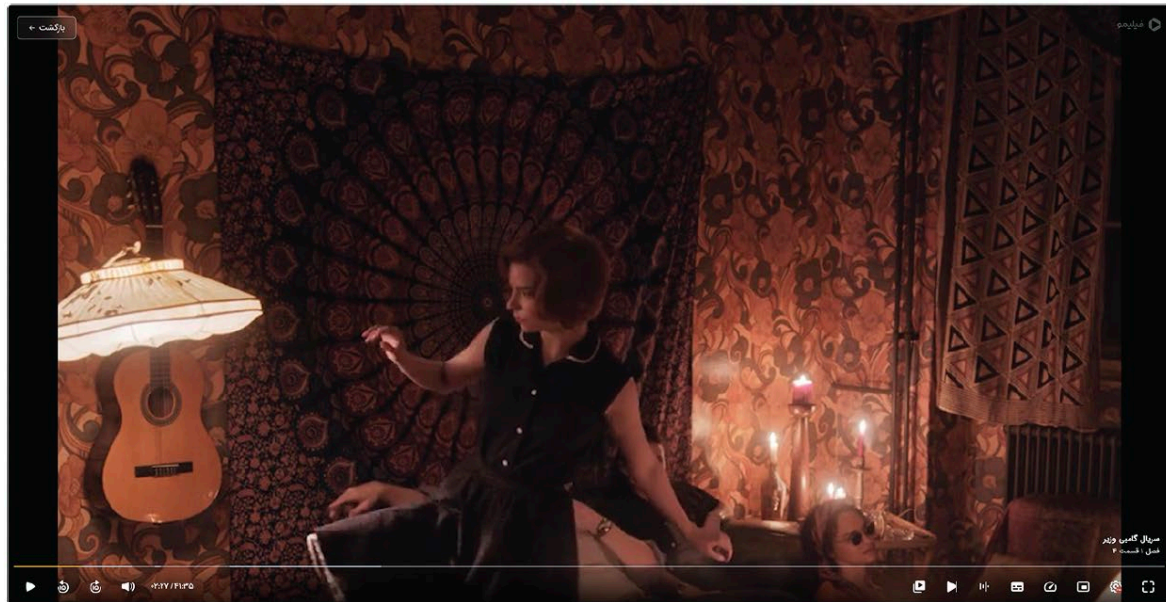
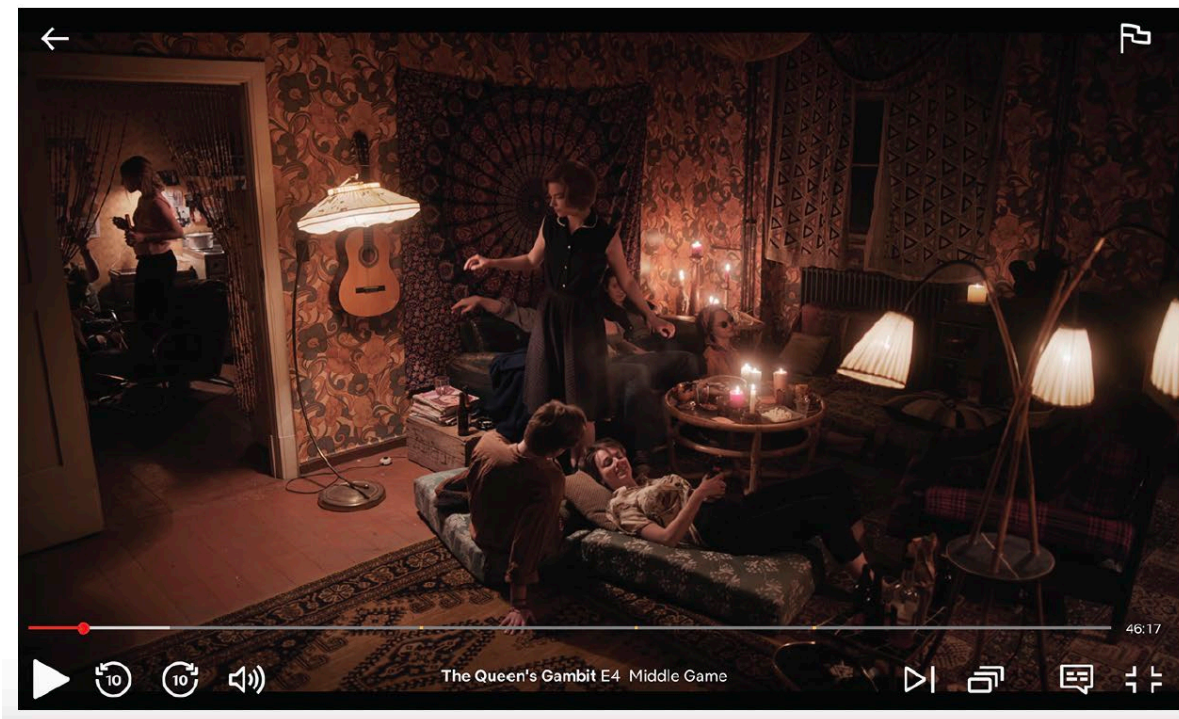
Crucially, all available foreign content, such as the above titles, has been revised and censored in accordance with state guidelines. As a case study, I examined *The Queen's Gambit* in terms of censored parts and length of episodes. The word 'Queen' had been translated to 'Minister' according to the post-revolutionary norm for chess, while 'Gambit' was left untranslated. Season 1 has seven episodes, which I examined on both Netflix and Filimo. As shown in the following table, several minutes of each episode have been deleted on Filimo (Fig. 5).

Series/Episode	Video Length on Netflix	Video Length on Filimo	Approximate Cut length min:sec
S1:E1 Openings	59:00	57:32	01:28
S1:E2 Exchanges	1: 05:09	1: 02: 37	02:32
S1:E3 Doubled Pawns	46:11	42:39	03:32
S1:E4 Middle Game	48:42	41:35	07:07
S1:E5 Fork	48:15	44:53	3:22
S1:E6 Adjournment	1:00:00	52:10	7:50
S1:E7 End Game	1:08:00	1:06:40	1:20

FIGURE 5 *The Queen's Gambit* miniseries: a comparison of the length of the episodes as shown on Netflix and Filimo, respectively.

The first episode on Netflix, *Openings*, begins with a knocking on a door and a man's voice calling 'Mademoiselle' in the dark. A moment later, Beth Harman, played by Anya Taylor-Joy, is first introduced to the viewer in a medium shot as she wakes up in a bathtub soaking wet and half-conscious, with the edge of the tub covering her body. Beth then stands up, and we see her lower body and bare legs as she gets out of the bathtub, stumbling over empty liquor bottles in the dark as she walks towards the door. In Filimo's version, this scene is shortened by a cut on Beth's move to get up from the tub till she opens the door. In the

light of the opened door, we see a full shot of two characters on Netflix, while in the Filimo version, a zoom-in to a medium shot of the two characters covers the nudity of Beth's lower body.



FIGURES 6 AND 7 The same party scene from *The Queen's Gambit* episode 4 on Filimo (top) and Netflix (bottom). Screenshots.

The second example is from episode 4, *Middle Game*, which has one of the longest censored sequences. Both image and sound have been edited to make the content meet the criteria for being available on Filimo. In the scene where Beth goes to a party at the invitation of a boy from her Russian-language class, the Netflix version presents a two-shot of them exchanging a half-smoked cigarette and talking together. Then, there is a cut to a long shot of the living room where two other couples are present, and Beth, in reaction to the boy's attempt at Russian dialogue, asks, 'You really like the shape of me?'. Filimo keeps the two shots unchanged but replaces the long shot with a zoom-in to remove one of the couples closer to the camera. Also, Beth's translated dialogue is changed into: 'Do you really like my chess-playing?'.

Moments later, Beth heads to the bedroom to call her foster mother. On Netflix, she is shown in a long shot of the living room as she walks to the kitchen where another couple is having a conversation, the female character with a cigarette in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other. Filimo zooms into a medium shot, removing two of the couples, and cuts up Beth's move to the bedroom entrance (Figs. 6 and 7).

In the scene with Beth's phone conversation, some of the dialogue and background sound have been changed. While on Netflix, we hear a vague sound from a TV programme in the background, on Filimo this sound has been replaced by a clear, somehow foregrounded voice of a female news reporter, which breaks in four times during the mother's parts of the conversation. First time, the news presenter says that 'today a network of illegal alcohol production...'; next time we hear bribes of a report on 'some profiteer people [who] produced alcohol', leading up to the third part where the reporter asserts that, 'preparation and distribution of non-standard alcohol still is happening...'. The fourth part adds further intensity to the crime reporting: 'in this regard, several large producers were accused of cooperation and arrested for corruption...'. The audio editing thus transfers the atmosphere of

the series to a decades-long social reality in Iran. The mother's advice to her daughter, 'Just be careful what you smoke, honey', has also been adjusted to 'Just take care of yourself'. All the erotic parts in the scene, Beth's memories and the following sex scene have been carefully removed by either zooms or cuts.

Availability of Iranian content

Most Iranian films and TV series are available on all SVOD platforms. All three platforms offer an option that allows users to purchase newly released Iranian films for an additional fee. The streaming services also 'commission or co-commission' (Chalaby 2024, 560) domestic content and invest in Iranian production on an annual basis, each with regard to some specific TV series for their platforms. Below, I shall present some examples of Iranian SVOD productions:

Filimo

This platform boasts its own popular fictional originals like the crime drama *Mortal Wound* (2021-2025); a historical romance, *Jeyran* (2022), and a comedy-drama, *Sorcerer* (2022). As a prominent example of the proactive role of these platforms, the political theme of Filimo's series *Aghazadeh* (2020) deserves mentioning; the series raised many debates regarding the political rivalry between the Islamic Republic's politicians.

Namava

Namava's popular series include the crime drama *The Asphalt Jungle* (2024), the historical drama *Women's Secret Network* (2022), which was banned before completion of all its episodes due to its implicit reference to Reza Shah's policy of promoting women's empowerment, and the puppet variety comedy *Get-Together* (2022). Namava's crime

mystery *The Frog* (2020-2021) was one of the first SVOD series to grab the attention of many youths.

Filmnet

Among Filmnet's fan favourites are the romantic drama miniseries *At the End of the Night* (2024), the adult puppet drama *Kalileh & Demneh Town* (2022), which explores national environmental, social and financial issues, and *The Secret of Survival* (2022), a comedy family drama.

Discoverability of domestic and foreign content

Discoverability may differ from user to user and/or vary over a few weeks or months due to platform updates. Investigating discoverability is therefore particularly challenging. The information below is based on the author's own observations, primarily from late 2024. To avoid bias from user history, I created new user accounts and examined the platforms with these new users, while comparing them with a couple of users who had previously subscribed. Also, I looked at the platforms as a user without a subscription.

Filimo

When subscribing to Filimo using an Iranian mobile number, you are asked to choose three films or series that interest you. Most of the options are from Iran, but I chose the only two Western titles available and one random Asian one (I did not choose any Iranian content). Still, when entering the main page, I found that most of the showcased titles were made in Iran.

The first section on Filimo's website is a slideshow, including a short video teaser of the SVOD's latest production, the third season of *Mortal Wound* (2021-2025), and pictures of

seven other Iranian titles, one animation, and one Western-produced film. The next five sections also advertise Iranian productions only. If you continue to scroll down, you can find some foreign titles, but over fifty per cent of the titles on the homepage are produced in Iran. Most of the other fifty per cent are of Asian or Eastern origin, whereas there are only few US or European titles. However, it is possible to limit the advertised titles to a specific country or genre. The easiest way to find a popular or recent title is to use the search menu or browse the ‘foreign’ tab. It is also possible to navigate the website by categories and genres. Users can create a My List by adding their favourites, and the account keeps a history of watched videos.

Namava

Namava’s homepage features a slideshow of twelve pictures: two from Asian and Western films and series, two for animation and football streaming, and eight showcasing Iranian and Namava productions. Further down the page, two more sections highlight domestically produced titles, live broadcasts, and Namava’s productions. Sections featuring a wider variety of Asian and Western titles follow after these. Namava allows users to filter videos by country or genre and sort them by production date or search for their names. Namava’s subscription allows for up to three users, each with their own selected My Lists and watch history, similar to Filimo. Namava also offers algorithmic recommendations based on the user’s previous activities under a section titled ‘Because You Watched’.

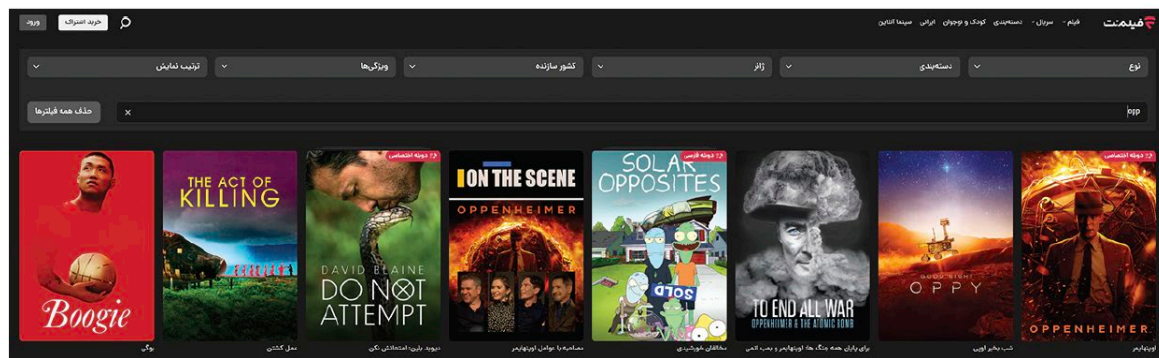
Filmnet

FIGURE 8 Example of Filmnet’s search engine. Screenshot.

Filmnet’s first section is a twelve-page slideshow featuring seven Iranian productions, two animations, and three Asian productions. The next section is dedicated to sports. Following that, there are additional sections of Iranian titles, some of which include larger pictures. Only the last three sections on the first page include some non-Iranian films and video series. Searching is still the easiest way for subscribers to find a Western title (Fig. 8). Even in its recommendations, the Filmnet platform primarily suggests Iranian titles within genres similar to those of the foreign titles you previously watched. However, users can add their favourite videos to their watchlist.

Overall, on all these platforms, non-Iranian content is available to subscribers, but it is neither primarily promoted nor advertised and requires a certain amount of effort to be discovered. Finding non-Iranian content necessitates awareness of their English titles or Persian translations for search, or the time and skill to browse the tabs and navigate the platforms. Therefore, the platforms, through their design and algorithms, lower the likelihood of discovering and viewing non-Iranian content, thereby diminishing the average number of users engaging with such content.

The Insoluble Dilemma of Choice and Control

Online streaming services in Iran claim that they provide their subscribers with unlimited choice. This so-called ‘free choice’ is, however, clearly limited to the available and supervised video content. While after many decades of underground market purchases, film fans can now find some of their desired content – including foreign productions – on the state’s legal platforms, it should never be forgotten that all content is under the state’s control.

The fact that Iranians now have access to multiple screens and numerous apps, in many cases through the use of VPN, complicates media studies. They watch satellite TV channels and videos on computers, tablets or their mobile phones; they may binge-watch, share videos on social media, or watch the same content across different platforms. VPN allows them to view original, uncensored parts of films or series on Netflix or Amazon Prime in any language, and then switch to state-approved Persian platforms to watch the rest, or vice versa. And some download Iranian or foreign content to share on social media. Throughout, viewers circumvent state censorship to access restricted content and actively compare state-approved content with non-approved material.

After over four decades of a strictly defined video policy, the Iranian state now works with registered corporations to create manageable video content libraries, aiming to attract as many Iranians as possible to spend time with the Islamic Republic’s certified videos, rather than with uncertified and unacceptable content in any other media. However, even these registered corporations with their verified content can face censorship pressures and potential blocking. For example, the Namava platform was blocked by Satra and a court order on 30 May 2025, due to what was characterised as deliberate violations involving the unlicensed showing of the series *Suvoshon* (Namava 2025), which contains scenes deemed to violate social morality. The blocking was lifted on 16 June, but many professionals in the industry

believe that such actions have an adverse effect on national film production and distribution (AsrIran 2025; Tabnak 2025).

The one thing that can be said with certainty about the future of Iran's SVOD platforms – and any future interaction of these platforms with their global counterparts – is that it is uncertain and tightly interlaced with the country's political alterations.

Acknowledgements

I sincerely thank Associate Professor Timothy Laurie for his insights and valuable input into this article. I extend my gratitude to Associate Professor Eva Jørholt, Editor-in-Chief of the Journal, for her time and careful handling of this paper.

Filmography

Aghazadeh (Iran 2020 – Filimo).

At the End of the Night (*Dar Entehay-e Shab*, Iran 2024 – Filmnet).

Barbie (USA 2023, dir. Greta Gerwig).

Bitter Coffee (*Ghahveye Talkh*, Iran 2010 – Home Show Network).

Blood Free (*Jibaejong*, South Korea 2024 – Disney+).

Cute Programmer (*Na Me Ke Ai*, China 2021 – Prime Video)

Get Together (*Mehmouni*, Iran 2022 – Namava).

Jeyran (Iran 2022 – Filimo).

Kalileh and Demneh Town (*Shahr-e Kalileh va Demneh*, Iran 2022 – Filmnet).

Mortal Wound (*Zakhm-e Kari*, Iran 2021-2025 – Filimo).

No Mercy (*Gaddar*, Turkey 2024 – Ay Yapim Fox TV)

- Oppenheimer* (USA / UK 2023, dir. Christopher Nolan)
- Paper Girls* (USA 2022 – Amazon Prime).
- Poker Face* (USA 2023 – Peacock).
- Savushun* (Iran 2025 – Namava).
- Sorcerer (Jadoogar*, Iran 2022 – Filimo).
- The Asphalt Jungle (Jangal-e Alephba*, Iran 2024 – Namava).
- The Frog (Ghoorbāgheh*, Iran 2020-2021 – Namava).
- The Hope (Ming long shao nian*, China 2023-2024 – Youku TV).
- The Man Who Fell to Earth* (USA 2022 – Showtime).
- The Queen's Gambit* (USA 2020 – Netflix).
- The Sand Man* (USA / UK 2022 – Netflix).
- The Secret of Survival (Raz-e Bagha*, Iran 2022 – Filmnet).
- Women's Secret Network (Shabakeh-e Makhfi-e Zanan*, Iran 2022 – Namava).

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¹ Please be advised that the URL links for MCIG and Satra in the list of references do not work for users outside of Iran. The links are not dead; access has been limited due to policies restricting access to certain government websites.

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