

# IRAN: REGULATING TO FACILITATE IN A PANDEMIC

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of the Iranian Audiovisual Media Regulatory Authority (SATRA) on how  
supportive regulatory responses during the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic  
strengthened the local audiovisual sector

**A**s coronavirus (COVID-19) spread across the world, it severely impacted many businesses, and social distancing, quarantine periods and crowd restrictions disrupted a wide variety of different industries. In Iran also, many live events, such as sports matches, concerts and other social gatherings were cancelled. In the movie sector, many traditional film studios had no idea how or when they would be able to produce new movies.

While many businesses have been hit severely by this outbreak, audiovisual media service providers have generally continued successfully throughout the pandemic.

Lockdown and quarantine have contributed to an increased use of media as a source of entertainment. After movie theatres and cinemas were closed, most digital content companies saw a surge in demand as more and more people stayed at home and signed up to these platforms. Tens of millions of homebound consumers joined these streaming services in search of entertainment and to alleviate loneliness and boredom while in isolation. Without cinemas, theatres, cafes, libraries, concerts and other live events, Iran's 70 million internet users turned to video on demand (VOD) services as a source of entertainment. The increase in the consumption of online media content resulted in the widespread growth of the streaming market.

As a result, relevant public departments including the telecommunications and audiovisual regulatory authorities brought in measures to support the industry and its professionals throughout this period and to minimize the risks and challenges associated with this increase. In particular, the Iranian Audiovisual Media Regulatory Authority (SATRA) adopted several strategies to facilitate and to support different actors in the Iranian audiovisual media industry. This paper outlines a few specific measures and initiatives adopted by SATRA since March 2020.

## VIRTUAL GATHERING INITIATIVE

"Nowrooz" is the Iranian new year ceremony which takes place in late March every year. It is a very popular and important part of the Iranian calendar for cultural events and family gatherings. The coincidence of the outbreak of the pandemic and Nowrooz amplified the social shock. The cancellation of planned trips, the closure of traditional cultural events that date back hundreds of years, the public lockdown on the popular "Nature Day" when usually almost no Iranian families stay at home, and the avoidance of subsequent family gatherings altogether, turned this Nowrooz into a social tragedy.

The audiovisual media sector came to the scene not only to seize a commercial opportunity but also to meet its public responsibility by helping make the situation tolerable. In addition to accelerating the release of new content, particularly popular TV series, the sector provided live coverage of cultural events including, but not limited to, the concerts and Nowrooz-specific traditional musical events which attracted huge public attention.

To facilitate this innovative idea, SATRA significantly eased the licensing procedure for these events by introducing a specific initiative called "Virtual Gatherings". This aimed to facilitate and promote live coverage of all the local events that normally attract hundreds of participants, but had become almost impossible to put on due to the pandemic. SATRA also provided a platform to share the live signal of those events with several domestic media service providers that were interested in participating in the initiative. Being almost fully locked down during approximately two weeks in new year holidays, the initiative was perceived as a great success not only from the promotion of domestic platforms and local content point of view, but also from the lens of an innovative regulatory response to an unexpected social shock.

## ONLINE SCREENING INITIATIVE

Many streaming services and VOD platforms were

← fearful that subscribers might opt out of their streaming subscriptions as a result of the COVID-19-related suspension in TV production. This was despite the fact that the closure of cinemas and theatres had seen internet platforms, especially video streaming companies, become Iranians' favoured source of entertainment.

As a result, SATRA paved the way for a situation which, for the first time ever, film studio productions that were supposed to have first-release screening in cinemas and theatres were allowed to stream online before opening at the box office. Taking into consideration that the yearly movie festival – “Fajr Festival” – takes place in late February, the “Online Screening” initiative was seen as a timely regulatory response to partially compensate for the closure of cinemas during the early weeks of the pandemic in March 2020, as well as providing an alternative way for the movie industry to stay alive and to release its festival production. As part of this initiative, SATRA provided a form of market platform for production companies to make non-exclusive deals with domestic VOD platforms in order to release their movies using online ticketing and pay-per-view mechanisms. Having access to national TV, the authority also introduced a central portal for the public announcement of new movies and the platforms they were to be released on.

Further, with the help of SATRA and private popular VOD platforms, specific types of content for children became free of charge for subscribers and users of these platforms in order to entertain kids during lockdown.

## NOTICE AND TAKEDOWN INITIATIVE

Having introduced the “Online Screening” initiative as a substitute for cinemas first releasing movie productions, SATRA also issued a regulatory policy to meet the commercial concerns of production companies about probable copyright infringement, as there were several cases of early infringement of the exclusive rights of creative content holders. To address this issue, SATRA introduced a specific “Notice and Takedown” initiative and, for the first time in Iran, all hosting companies were forced to immediately remove infringing content following SATRA's notice, which was a huge victory for intellectual property protection.

## MEDIA TENTS INITIATIVE

As a traditional community, Iran is well known for a yearly calendar that includes a few very popular religious rituals. At the top of the list are “Moharam” and “Ramadhan”. Tens of thousands local communities run daily gatherings during those ceremonies. Based on the latest official data released, there are more than ninety-five thousand

local communities that are already registered with the relevant authorities. Consequently, the pandemic ban on large group gatherings made those traditional rituals very problematic.

In response, SATRA introduced the “Media Tents” initiative, in which those local communities were able to live broadcast their events and to interactively keep in touch with their community members. To make this happen, SATRA, in a close collaboration with telecommunications authority and internet operators, not only issued a licence for domestic video-sharing platforms (VSPs) that were interested in participating in the initiative, but also it offered temporary free-of-charge internet traffic for those specific platforms incentivizing their users' online participation, rather than very risky physical gatherings. This meant that not only were these local communities, irreplaceable sources of social capital and tradition, kept alive, they also inevitably experienced a new generation of community building that could pave the way for their future development and adaptation to the digital era.

A huge success, this year more than 3,950 religious communities have enjoyed the service provided by 9 domestic VSP platforms and the number of viewers has doubled compared to last year, reaching a record of almost 38.5 million unique visitors during ten days of ceremony. From a media sovereignty point of view, the initiative successfully shifted public attention from international giants like Instagram to domestic platforms as the main public source for local communities and their audiences. This was made possible due to joint collaboration between SATRA, other relevant departments, domestic platforms and local communities.

## THE “SHAD” PLATFORM AND ONLINE SCHOOLING

Like many other sectors, schools and universities were also closed and students had to turn to distance learning. In a very ambitious project, one of the main internet operators, in close coordination with the Ministry of Education, launched a national platform called “SHAD” enabling all schools to keep in touch with their students during the pandemic. The platform aimed to serve more than 18 million students and 700 thousand teachers. It was officially introduced as the only permitted platform for schools, preventing students from probable harmful or inappropriate content that might be available over popular social networks and VSPs like Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp or Telegram.

Furthermore, SATRA granted several licences to specific streaming services such as Filimo School in order to enable them to stream and broadcast live classrooms and/or provide supplementary educational programmes for all age groups. It



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also posted a full list of all the platforms and their various services for distance learning on its website.

### MOST DIGITAL ELECTION EVER

During the last presidential election in June 2021, the audiovisual sector had a huge opportunity to gain public attention as a viable alternative to national and local electoral campaigns. In the absence of physical campaigns and electoral rallies, audiovisual platforms started to provide an exclusive channel for any candidates, enabling them to interactively connect to their supporters and convey their political messages through audiovisual content. Being endorsed by the electoral commission, those channels were seen as the official communication channels of the various campaigns.

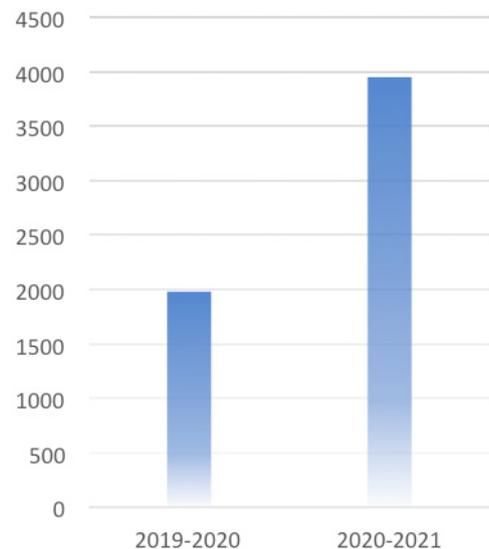
In this initiative, 11 domestic platforms actively participated, in which almost 1,970 specific content spots were broadcast. In addition, the live signal of official electoral debates over national TV were also rebroadcast by those platforms. As a regulator, SATRA was particularly keen to protect political neutrality and fairness on the main audiovisual platforms. The investigation of complaints from different campaigns was also an important part of SATRA's regulatory response.

### CONCLUSION

Overall, it seems that the pandemic has opened up several windows of opportunity for the sector by elevating its role in key sociopolitical events and putting the industry at the centre of public attention. This essay has tried to shed light on the role of regulatory policies in facilitating the steep growth of the sector as well as safeguarding it from the challenges imposed by the unforeseen pandemic. It shows how swift and effective responses taken in regulating audiovisual media service providers can foster commercial innovation and ultimately benefit ordinary citizens who consume these services while in lockdown and shift the industry into a state which paves the way for the sector's further development.

Above: SATRA logo,  
<http://en.satra.ir/>

### SATRA MEDIA TENTS INITIATIVE



### NUMBER OF PARTICIPATING LOCAL RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

NUMBER OF PLATFORMS:	9
TOTAL UNIQUE VISITORS:	38,003,689
CONCURRENCY RECORD:	7,051,100
DAILY VISIT AVERAGE:	2,923,361

### VIEWING STATISTICS

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