

Fellowship Report

Matthew Abrams, Network 20/20 Iran Project Research Fellow
Center for International Law, New York Law School
April 26, 2007

From July 2006 to March 2007, I served as one of two Fellows for Network 20/20's Iran Project, an in-depth study of the political, social, and economic realities of daily life in Iran. The Fellowship's effect on my understanding of the Iranian society and culture has been significant; working on the Iran Project opened my eyes to an Iran beyond the common misconceptions and attitudes of the current U.S.-Iran relationship, and the value of the Fellowship to my education has been both great and unique among my law school experiences. I sought the Fellowship with minimal experience in International Law and knowledge of Iran, and I now exit the Fellowship with a broader education and a strong understanding of the details of U.S.-Iranian relations.

Upon applying for the Fellowship with my resume, a short statement of interest, and a sample of my research ability, I was interviewed by the President and Founder of Network 20/20, Dr. Patricia Huntington, and Professor Tai-Heng Cheng, Associate Director of the Center for International Law. After being accepted, my co-Fellow and I contacted Dr. Huntington each week to discuss and update our research and to share our impressions of the information we had collected. The Project's initial focus was on nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) and their activities in Iran; however, Dr. Huntington, Professor Cheng, and other Network 20/20 members soon came to the realization that as interesting as the Project's direction was, a study considering how U.S.-Iranian relations could be improved and encouraged would be more useful to the Project's diverse audience. Consequently, I would remind those students who are

interested in fellowship work that the original direction of a project may require alteration and deviation at times, and that flexibility is a key quality for prospective Fellows.

My work was limited to approximately five to ten hours per week, and my activities focused first on creating a list of Iranian NGO's focusing on the topics of Women's Rights and Domestic Violence, the Environment, Energy, and Health/Anti-Drug programs. With each group and website I found, I evaluated their Internet access levels, group goals, and connections to other Iranian organizations. Additionally, I collected information from the United Nations and U.S. Department of State websites, European NGO websites with a focus on Iran, and several blogs in both Farsi and English to aid the education of the Network 20/20 members who would be visiting Iran in November 2006. Of course, in educating others, I learned a great deal about Iran myself, and I consider this new understanding to be the greatest compensation for my work on the Project.

As with any research position, a prospective Fellow must be able to digest information from multiple sources into useful form, and especially in dealing with a country with limited online connectivity, I found myself collecting conflicting information and handling the difficult task of providing a coherent picture of the varying points-of-view to Dr. Huntington and other Network 20/20 members. In addition to research tasks, I was also given the opportunity to draft sections of what would become "Reframing Iran: Views from the Field," the final report of the Iran Project, including sections on Anti-Drug attitudes and programs, Internet connectivity and censorship, and European NGO's with a focus in Iran. I corresponded with both lay and academic sources to provide a real and personal perspective to the Internet-based research I had

already collected, and I participated in media coverage of the Project and Network 20/20's trip to Iran.

I was very pleased with my experience as a Fellow of Network 20/20 and the Center for International Law. In addition to the enlightenment that comes with in-depth research and education, I thoroughly enjoyed the level of involvement and access I was granted as a Fellow. On starting work with Network 20/20, I was unsure of what my part in the Project would be, but as a result of the high quality of partnership between Network 20/20 and the Center, I was able to act in several roles—student, teacher, researcher, drafter, interviewer, and so on—and benefit immensely from those experiences. In conclusion, I strongly recommend a Fellowship through the Center for International Law and with Network 20/20 to all students willing to work hard and maintain flexibility and seeking to create positive changes in international relations.