

The Role of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting in Blocking Access to Information

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Abstract

This article takes a brief look at various dimensions of the Islamic Republic's methods and mechanisms for misguiding the public interest in information by delivering misinformation and propaganda.

Biography

Ali Sheikholeslami is London correspondent for Euronews. He has worked for Bloomberg as an Iran reporter and the Independent as a blogger. He is an award-winning writer and his articles and fiction have been published in Iran, Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Bangladesh and Britain.

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The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting declares on its "About Us" that it operates as the "Public Relations arm of the Establishment." It also criticises an "expansionist media empire of the West" and notes that a "media war" is being staged that targets public opinion and intends to bring about change in people's culture and lifestyle. In its mission statement, it says that Islam, the soul of the revolution and the Constitution must govern all the programmes it produces.

The country's national broadcaster, with an annual budget of £675 million for the coming year⁴¹ has grown to a conglomerate that runs more than a hundred websites, alongside its eight national and six satellite television channels.

This is a far cry from the country's first radio station which was established 70 years ago with five hours of programmes a day. Now, in addition to the national channels, the IRIB has various regional television channels and radio stations and its newspaper, Jam-e Jam⁴², has a daily circulation of 450,000.

News

In its news bulletins, a hierarchy is preferred that is based on the position of the person rather than the merit of the news as news. For instance, if the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has spoken to Iran's athletes and on the same day a tsunami has hit the Pacific region, the former will be the headline news with extensive coverage.

The length of a news piece is determined in a similar manner. A 20-minute edit of the leader's speech may dominate the day's main evening news bulletin. This should be seen in the context of IRIB's statement that it broadcasts 50,000 hours of news per year.

Lack of Independent Journalism

⁴¹ Iranian year begins on March 21.

⁴² The newspaper can be accessed on-line at: <http://www.jamejonline.ir/> and an English version is at: <http://jamejonline.ir/en/default.aspx> [Accessed 17 April 2011]

The premise that the IRIB can be relied on for journalism that viewers can regard as independent is questionable, mainly because it is seen as a mouthpiece for the state. It is hard to quantify the level of trust, but it is safe to say that within the urban population it is low.

There is no criticism of the state on any fundamental issues. The extent of the IRIB's critical news-making is very limited and can only be seen in instances such as condemning a construction project that has gone wrong or stating an opinion on what can be done to decrease inflation, albeit based on the unreliable Central Bank figures.

Ideological Programming

Drama series normally carry religious or political messages and the moral of the story is often very obvious and overt. This characteristic could be viewed as a counter attack in line with the IRIB's mission to stand against the so-called "media war."

An example might be a series that was made about Iran's nuclear programme, with a young engineer who falls prey to foreign spy networks. Others may include those made especially for the month of Ramadan, in which ethical lessons are taught. These sometimes have a lighter tone and use humour as a vessel for the message.

Political Preference

The lack of an independent editorial line means that it is always difficult to obtain a balanced debate. In interviews, the journalist often acts like a state spokesperson and interviewees may be pushed to clarify whether they stand on the side of the mainstream discourse advertised by the government.

Again, in line with the underlying fundamentals of the IRIB, it discriminates in allocating airtime. Opposition forces not only lack access to the country's only TV space, but there are even hostile programmes broadcast about and against them.

Recent examples are the treatment given to Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi. The former served as Prime Minister for eight years, the latter as Speaker of the Parliament. Since they claimed that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's win in the June 2009 presidential election was fraudulent, they have been subject to hostile programming on the IRIB.

Private Television

No private television is allowed in Iran. That makes the IRIB a monopoly with an extremely lucrative advertising revenue-making arm, in which no competitors are welcome (permitted).

The main reason for this situation is the mainstream state paranoia that any independent media outlet is funded by the intelligence services of foreign enemies and has a hidden agenda to topple the regime.

This paranoia came to the surface even more strikingly following the June 2009 election. The BBC, which had launched its Persian television service several months earlier, became a

focus of criticism by Iranian authorities; its signal was jammed and its journalists were labelled as spies.

Ostrich's Head in the Sand

In some instances, the broadcaster actually refuses to show important events. This is one level above the normal censorship that happens in programme-making where writers are subject to the censor's blue pencil or a cleavage is pixelated or the lines of an actor are mistranslated when foreign films are dubbed. Some anti-government protests were never acknowledged as happening by IRIB, and others were falsely attributed to thugs.

Local/Regional Channels

IRIB's regional offices in each province produce news and other programmes specific to the area. In provinces with ethnic minorities, for instance in the Azerbaijani provinces in the northwest, some of the programming is in the local language.

In these regional areas, following the same line as the national channels simply adds to the frustration of the minorities, who have demanded for a long time to be taught in their mother tongues in schools but are accused by the central government of advocating separatism.

Satellite

Although the use of satellite dishes is banned in Iran, many people defy the ban, even in the most remote areas. The IRIB is conscious of losing viewers who choose this alternative programming. It monitors the satellite channels, particularly those broadcasting in Persian, and tries to counter them either by producing similar programmes or ones where particular channels or series are criticised.

Conclusion

The IRIB can be described best as a tribune for the state and an official platform for propaganda. It is neither independent nor critical. Whilst these features remain, it will not only fail to gain the trust of its viewers, but it will be part and parcel in blocking their access to information.