

Islamic Republic's Approach to the Latest Persian Entertainment Television

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Abstract

By examining Iranian government's response to the programmes of Manoto TV, the latest European-based commercial station aimed at viewers in Iran, the historic power of this important medium cannot be overestimated. Coordinated action by both Iranian and western authorities in opposing Iran's forces against free access to information through its media arms both in Iran and abroad is a much needed step in demonstrating a commitment to securing rights and freedom.

Biography

Potkin Azarmehr is one of the first Iranians to use the Internet for political purposes. He is also a contributor to media outlets on Iran-related matters and maintains a blog with over 90,000 unique readers a year. He is a business intelligence consultant and as part of his work, was instrumental in exposing claims of Haystack anti-filter tool as a fraud.

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"Propaganda can bring down a mountain." Ayatollah Khomeini

Iran's most religious families shunned having television sets in their homes before the Revolution. Television, like many new and modern concepts, which incidentally at one time included tables and chairs, was frowned upon by Iran's clerics as a symbol of Western influence and decadence that diverted the faithful from going to mosques and listening to sermons. "The television aerials on roof tops are arrows through Imam Hussein's (holy Shiite martyr and the prophet's grandson) heart" was how a boy of similar age to me at the time, who was from a religious family in my neighbourhood, replied when I asked him, if they had a television at home.

However, Ayatollah Khomeini did not shun TV cameras during his stay at Neauphle-le-Chateau in France. He conducted 115 interviews in his three and half month stay. This enthusiasm for interviews clearly demonstrates his profound understanding of the power and importance of disseminating information through media, including international television broadcasts.

The takeover of Iran's national state TV broadcasting led by the left wing Marxist Fedayeen and Mojahedin (MKO) was the turning point during the 1979 revolution and signalled the end of the monarchy to the last remnants of the Shah's supporters who were still resisting. After the Revolution, one of the first acts of monopolising power by the extremist followers of Ayatollah Khomeini was putting the state TV under the strict control of the religious zealots. Television was no longer a symbol of decadence but firmly in the service, and under the control, of the new Islamic state. It was then that television aerials started appearing on the roofs of the most religious families in our neighbourhood.

The advent of satellite television in the mid 1990s was perceived as both a threat and an opportunity for the Islamic Republic. A huge investment was planned to use this new

technology as a propaganda tool for the state as well as ways of stopping the foreign satellite televisions from influencing the Iranian population. Throughout this battle of the airwaves, the Islamic Republic has shown a complete disregard for the rules. While its own satellite TV stations are full of inflammatory political propaganda and lies aimed at overthrowing other governments and exporting its own revolution, it is obsessively intolerant of any Persian television not under its control, even if it is an entertainment channel without a political directive.

In this paper we examine the Islamic Republic's reactions towards a new commercial television channel for Persian speakers that went on air in October last year. The corporate company is Marjan Television and it has two channels, Manoto 1 and Manoto 2. The latter broadcasts documentaries bought from other sources, dubbed and subtitled in Persian. It can be compared to any similar channel in the West, like the History Channel, Discovery Channel, BBC Knowledge, National Geographic etc. The documentaries shown on Manoto 2 range from scientific to historical to cultural, wildlife or any other subject one may expect on a documentary channel. Manoto 1, however, is mainly entertainment. About 40% of the programmes are original content and the rest are once again purchased and dubbed into Persian. It has no live programmes, even the news programme shown once a day from Monday to Thursdays is pre-recorded with almost no original content news but a copy/paste of other news media sources.

The flagship of Manoto TV, which made it become known among Iranians, was a programme similar to X-Factor, where potential candidates went through a week of gruelling training with Iran's music gurus, like the legendary Googoosh and Hooman Khalatbari, and based on audience votes, the contestants were either eliminated or moved on to the next stage of the programme. The number of telephone votes received was a staggering 700,000, where 75% of the votes were from inside Iran. Such feedback clearly demonstrated that the Iranian population inside Iran was desperately yearning for quality, Persian language, entertainment programmes. Manoto TV is the first quality Persian-language TV channel from outside Iran that receives no state funding. All the necessary capital is raised from venture capitalists with no political agenda, who are purely looking for a return on their investment. Despite it being a commercial and entertainment channel, the Islamic Republic was put on a state of alert even before the Manoto started its programming.

Prior to going on air, Manoto broadcast short previews of some of its future programmes. One of them was a teaser that introduced the television channel to all Iranians, male, female, young, old, and all ethnicities and religions. The visual aid used to describe the channel for Iranians of all religions included the religious symbols used by Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and others, including the Baha'is. The Baha'i symbol, which was shown along with other religious symbols, was enough to start the Islamic Republic's knee jerk reaction by publishing the same text in several Iranian newspapers and news sites with the heading: "Who are the Baha'i executives of Manoto TV?"⁴⁴

Manoto was accused of being funded and started by the Baha'is in England with the help of British intelligence services, and Manoto TV personalities that had appeared in front of the camera were singled out. Several were said to be practising Baha'is or were accused of having Baha'i friends who had helped them get their TV jobs. These gross fabrications and accusations were illustrative of how the Iranian regime tries to label people without any basis or factual evidence. Some of the mundane information on the presenters were taken

⁴⁴ See the original Farsi article published on Alborz Professional News Site at: <http://www.alborznews.net/fa/pages/?cid=32014> [Accessed 17 April 2011]

straight from their Facebook profiles and the rest were just figments of their imagination. Neither the directors nor as yet any of the employees at Manoto are Baha'is, although the television channel operating from London, UK, practices an equal opportunity policy.

The Islamic Republic continued with the Baha'i angle of accusations against Manoto in order to reduce its popularity, but as this seemed to have no impact, it then resorted to other means. Various so-called "experts" and "specialists" started to analyse where the television's funding came from. As is so often the case, they pointed a finger at the UK government or UK intelligence services. Even more absurdly, every programme was taken apart and analysed as to how the Islamic Republic's enemies had lost all hope of the possibility of a military invasion and so had decided to launch soft war to change the culture and traditions of the Iranian people. Bizarre conclusions were reached based on the most innocent and ordinary entertainment programmes. One such analysis was based on the 'Come Dine with Me' programme shown on Manoto 1. The article claimed Manoto was set up to change the lifestyle of the Muslim Iranians.⁴⁵

Programmes that are examined and twisted in this way show the sinister taste amongst Iran's ruling elite for conspiracies against the regime. In this case there was a mixture of half-truths and fiction, such as the perceived aims of the "neo-imperialists" who made the Iranian version of 'Come Dine with Me':

"The participants are selected from a wide range of backgrounds so that any viewer with their own lifestyle and tastes can sympathise with at least one participant, so that the fear of some behaviours is broken when one sees someone similar to one's self behaving that way. If the host and guest are of different sexes, the presenter reminds them not to forget kissing the other person and if this is not done they are addressed as a low class person. Thus the proper and improper, values and anti-values are inducted inversely in the viewer. In many instances, guests bring alcoholic drinks as a present for their host and engage in a competition on the make and brand of their own present. The kind of food, the starters, the desserts identify the intent of the producers in a gradual change of taste in food and drinks for the Iranian viewer. Having traditional Persian food alongside alcoholic drinks is an action that clearly shows the intention of the producers to break taboos, for example, having Ghormeh Sabzi or Dizi with alcoholic drinks."

If Come Dine with Me was not a bad enough sinister plot by the imperialists and the neo-imperialists, just read how other programs are described. "Why Not", a programme in which the female presenter attempts to find out whether she can survive for a day in a male-dominated job, is viewed by the Islamic Republic's "experts" as a plot of western intelligence agencies: 'In "Why Not" which is about women's tendencies to seek employment in a variety of fields, the producers blatantly insist that women must engage in different jobs'. On Zereshk, which is a light hearted programme all about a male and female presenter making quick but tasty meals: "Zereshk also tries to deal with the problem of women who work and struggle to find the time to cook because of their busy work schedule. This programme is also taboo-breaking, as it relates to the opposite sex, unusual relations with neighbours, the style of cooking and other such anti-cultural instances."

⁴⁵ See the original Farsi article on Mashregh News at: <http://www.mashreghnews.ir/NSite/FullStory/News/?Id=32604>
[Accessed 17 April 2011]

On a programme about a day in the life of successful Iranians abroad, it writes:

"In the Welcome to My Life programme, the narrator of the programme teaser, goes in search of successful personalities, their place of residence, their occupation, their talents and skills, so the Western preferred standards of success is presented to the viewer.' And so on, every single programme is ripped apart and described as a Western attempt in waging a sinister "soft war" of some sort. The taboo of a young male and female presenter in a programme of course never goes unnoticed by the Islamic Republic, even if they just report on cultural events taking place across Britain: "In Manoto Plus, apart from an improper presentation by two presenters of opposite sex, cultural reports of events across London are shown where the main brunt of them is in inducing Western beliefs, norms and components to the viewer."

Needless to say that all these accusations and analyses have not only not reduced the popularity of this new TV station, but in a way have served as advertising by making it even more popular. Aware of this fact, the Islamic Republic security apparatus does not stop at writing articles alone.

The Manoto website was soon filtered inside Iran. A cat and mouse game of new domain names purchased by Manoto and further filtering of the new domain names by the Iranian government has continued ever since. Although at the present time the Islamic Republic has not jammed the broadcasts at source, meaning targeting the entire bouquet of channels next to Manoto on Hotbird, local random jamming continues. Many viewers report that on certain occasions or times they cannot receive the signals in their neighbourhood.

The most potent weapon of the Islamic Republic in making sure such ventures are not successful, however, comes via the companies trading in Iran that are scared of placing advertisement on these channels. They must comply with a long list of dos and don'ts, so that they do not face possible adverse consequences in Iran.

The Islamic Republic's reaction to this commercial entertainment television, demonstrated here, clearly points to its internal sense of insecurity. It also shows that the Islamic Republic's intelligence services are not that strong. For example, all the information about who owns Marjan TV, its chief executive and directors are known and on the company's website. Yet nearly six months after the company first began broadcasting, the regime is still unable to access the correct information and thus continues to make absurd mistakes.

While the Iranian regime continues its obsessive battle against dissemination of information that is not under its own control, it exploits the loopholes it may find in western democracies in order to propagate its own propaganda.

Today, the Islamic Republic broadcasts in more than 25 languages. It has branches in more than 45 countries including most western European countries. Strangely, the western democracies allow Iranian state TV activities go unhindered even when they repeatedly break broadcasting laws.

OFCOM, for example, has so far refused to uphold any complaints it has received regarding numerous violations by Press TV, the English broadcasting arm of the Islamic Republic state TV. Press TV maintains studios and offices in Hanger Lane, West London. Examples of some specific complaints made to OFCOM regarding Press TV include:

- Complaint made by Maziar Bahari about his interview by Press TV when he was in prison with Iranian intelligence agents standing behind him. The Press TV presenter was fully aware that it was not a normal interview in which the interviewee could voluntarily and freely express himself.
- Complaint made about Press TV news when the station falsely claimed that Dr. Arash Hejazi, a witness to Neda's murder after the 2009 elections, was wanted by Interpol.
- Complaint made about a documentary shown on Press TV, which accused Arash Hejazi of being part of the murder team sent to kill Neda.
- Numerous complaints about total bias and lack of balanced reporting by Press TV on Iran-related news.

The complacency shown by western authorities towards the Islamic Republic getting away with violating broadcasting rules not only makes the regime more audacious in its approach, but it further disheartens the Iranian population, some of whom begin to believe that the regime is too strong to be dealt with.

Not only do western authorities seem unable or unwilling to tackle the problem of Iranian broadcasting, but even the trade unions have turned a blind eye to international labour solidarity. While many of Iran's bus driver union leaders and transport workers are languishing in jails, Press TV continues to use London buses and tube stations for its advertising campaigns. Slogans such as 'we give voice to the voiceless' or "find out why they are trying to silence us" all smack of rank hypocrisy to anyone who follows Iran-related news. It seems an unequal war of information is being fought by a side that is audacious and well-funded and a side which is timid or at best complacent.